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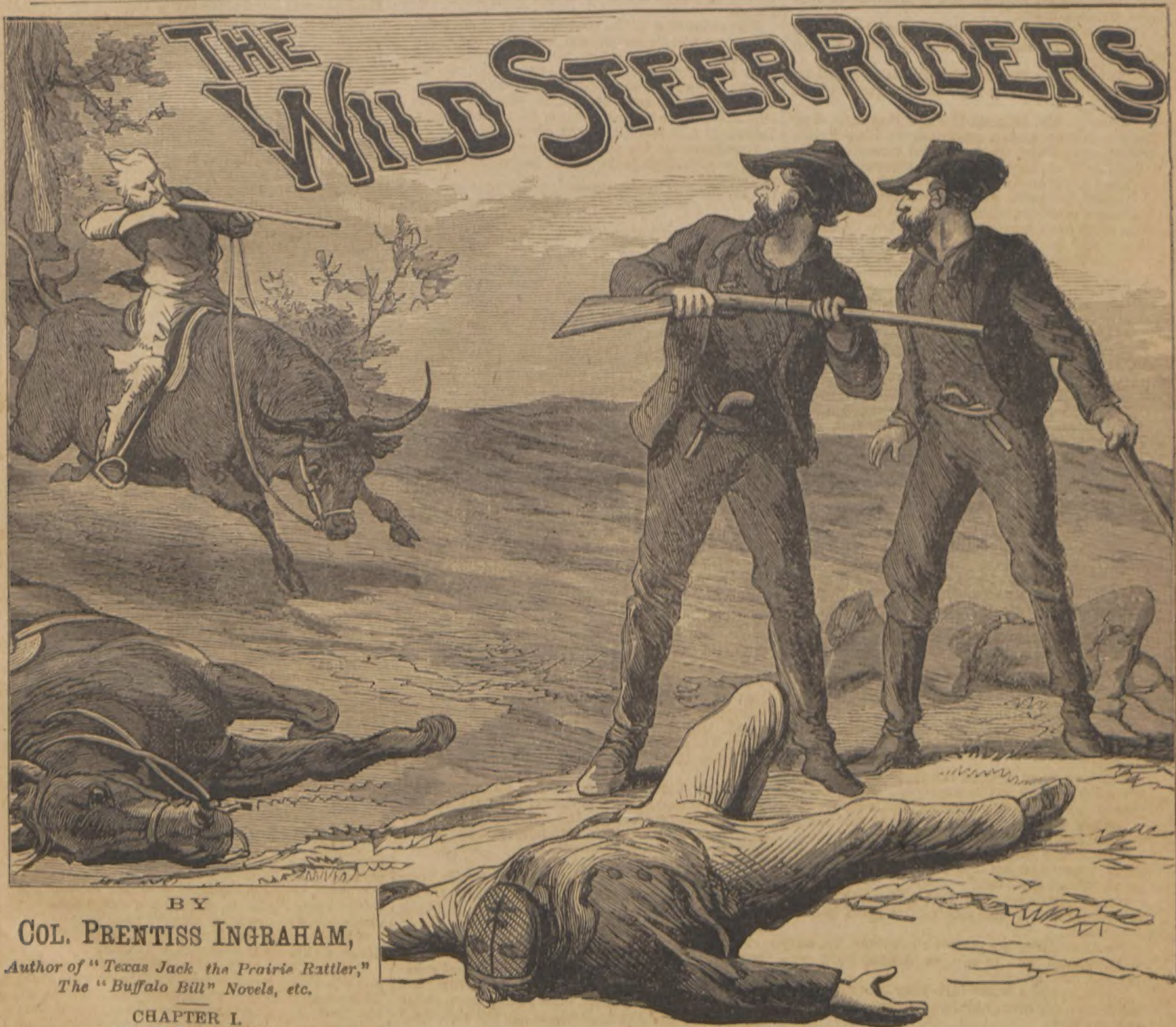
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BY

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The "Buffalo Bill" Novels, etc.

CHAPTER I.

FROM AN AMBUSH.

Two sharp reports rang out from an ambush, two men fell from their saddles, then the words: "Come, my child, ride for your life!"

Four horses bounded away together at the sharp command, but two were riderless.

Upon the others were an elderly man and a maiden, and their appearance indicated that they were not at home on a Texas prairie.

The horseman was a man of fifty-five, a fine rider, erect for his years, and looked just what he was—a gentleman of wealth refinement and education, who passed his days in a life of luxury in the city.

The maiden was scarcely over eighteen, and, with a lovely face, she had a faultless form,

OR TEXAS JACK'S TERRORS

"THE MAD HERMIT! THE MAD HERMIT!" SHOUTED THE MEN, AND IN TERROR FLED.

which her dark, close-fitting riding-habit fitted to perfection.

A sombrero with a sable plume surmounted her head, and bathed her face somewhat in shadow, while her hair, having escaped from its comb, fell in golden masses down her back, even resting upon her horse.

Four persons had ridden over a rise in the prairie, halting to water their horses at a small stream, and then out of the thick timber had flashed two rifles—at which those who rode in advance had fallen dead in their saddles.

Those two were thorough specimens of the Texan plainsman, dressed in border costume, well-mounted and armed; but against an ambush their prowess had not protected them.

At the cry of her father the maiden had laid her whip sharply upon her horse, and away the two had bounded, the two riderless animals leading the way.

But, unguided as they were, the two loose horses turned aside and came to a halt, while the fugitives pressed on with whip and spur across the trackless plain, as a glance over his shoulder had shown the horseman that they were pursued.

A look also revealed to the maiden several horsemen dashing out of the timber, and others following, until five men were visible in hot chase.

"Father, they are Indians," said the maiden, and her face became deadly pale.

"Yes, Adèle; but we are well-mounted and can distance them."

"Our horses are tired, sir, and besides, you do not know the trails and are only armed with a revolver."

The horseman realized the situation in all its desperation. He saw that his daughter spoke the truth.

In early life Colonel Horace Fontaine had been a soldier, and, a graduate at West Point, he had afterward distinguished himself in the Mexican War, and for a year afterward commanded a Texan fort on the frontier.

He had, however, given up a soldier's life and become a merchant in Baltimore, where his wife soon after died, leaving him with two children, Ethan and Adèle.

While Ethan had grown up a wild, reckless youth, causing his father much sorrow, Adèle had been the joy of his life, and the fact that his son, whom he had at last sent to Texas, and started on a ranch, had gotten into trouble there by killing a man, had taken the merchant to the prairies, where, as she had urged it, he had taken his daughter.

Before their arrival Ethan had escaped from prison by taking another life, and, knowing that his son could never again show his face at his home in Texas, Colonel Fontaine had started out to his ranch, under two guides, to close up his affairs there and then return to Baltimore.

It was when on the way to Ethan's ranch that they had been fired upon, with the result already known, and it then became a race for life across the prairies.

Into the mind of Adèle it flashed, as she rode along, how she, a belle in city society, was flying before a band of cruel Indians on a Texan plain, and for a moment she was sorry that she had not allowed her father to come alone.

But, that thought was unworthy of her, and she was glad that she was with her noble, loving parent in the danger that now beset them.

"They are gaining, father," she said with perfect calmness.

"Yes, my child, I fear that it is so, for our horses are very tired."

"We cannot escape them, father; and see! there is still another one just coming out of the timber."

The merchant gritted his teeth to keep back his emotion and made no reply, while, as the pursuing Indians still gained, Adèle cried:

"Alas! father, we are doomed! we cannot escape them."

"By death only, my child, and, as I know what these demons are, I have made up my mind what I shall do."

"And what is that, father?" asked Adèle, fairly startled by the expression upon her father's face.

He drew from his pocket a revolver, his only weapon, and said in a voice hoarse with suppressed feeling:

"I will send a bullet into your heart, and another into my own, before those red devils shall capture us."

"And, father, I will thank you for the act," was the brave response of the maiden, as the deed, that must be done, came before her in all its appalling horror. She glanced again over her shoulder at the pursuers, now not two hundred yards behind them and certainly gaining, though slowly.

"Oh, father! that last man is not an Indian!" she cried, excitedly.

The colonel turned in his saddle and said: "You are right! Can it be one of our guides, who was only wounded?"

"No, father, for that man is not dressed as they were, and yonder are the two horses feeding on the prairies."

"It must be a renegade white, then, with the

red-skins. If so our fate is the same, my child."

"Or a rescuer, father."

"No, Adèle. Reckless as are these gallant Texans, they are not so mad as to attack five Indians single-handed."

"See, father, he is moving off toward the left, as though not to follow."

Colonel Fontaine turned half round in his saddle, and saw that the horseman in the rear, and who was about as far behind the red-skins, as the latter were behind his daughter and himself, was moving off from the trail, at an oblique to the left.

What it meant he did not understand, but he soon discovered that the horse of the white man was gaining rapidly on the Indians, in spite of his oblique movement, and must soon be even with them.

He saw, too, that the stranger's horse was moving easily, and not being urged, and that the rider carried a rifle in his hand, sat in his saddle with graceful ease, and certainly had formed some plan of action, either for or against them.

Thus the chase went on for a few more minutes, which seemed so long to the two fugitives, and the colonel and his daughter were laying the whip hard upon the flanks of their straining horses.

But the Indians, grouped close together, with one only a few lengths in the lead, were still slowly gaining, and must soon be within easy range.

The horseman in the rear had diverged from the trail until he had placed considerable space between himself and the red-skins, though he was now almost even with them, and, as the father and daughter looked toward him together, they saw him suddenly throw his rifle to his shoulder, while his horse came to a quick halt. Instantly followed the crack of the rifle.

Involuntarily the fugitives bent low in their saddles as though to dodge the leaden messenger of death.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS HORSEMAN.

To the amazement of the colonel and Adèle, and to their joy, the shot of the strange horseman was not aimed, as they had believed, at them; instead, a wild yell, a waving of the hands in death agony, and the leading Indian toppled from his horse, while the others, unconscious up to that moment of a foe on their trail, for nothing had caused them to look behind them, came to a sudden halt and turned in the direction of their unlooked-for danger.

But, quickly, the horseman gave them another shot, and then darted toward them like an arrow from a bow.

His second shot brought down a horse, and a volley from the red-skins greeted him, and his splendid animal went down with a tremendous fall.

But his rider caught on his feet, and, though he fell upon one knee, his rifle was again raised and fired quickly, with deadly aim, for a second Indian went to earth; and at once rising, the dauntless man advanced toward his foes.

"My God! that brave fellow is going to his death! Remain here, my child; while I go to his aid!" and wheeling to the right-about, with revolver in hand, the colonel spurred back to the scene of combat.

But he went not alone, for Adèle followed.

At this unlooked-for turn in affairs, and with the brave, though now dismounted horseman advancing on foot with his repeating-rifle in hand, the three remaining Indians turned in flight, the one whose horse had been slain springing upon the back of his fallen comrade's animal.

"Your horse, if you please, sir, and I will prevent them capturing yonder animals," cried the gallant rescuer as the colonel dashed up, and he pointed to the two horses of the fallen guides, nearly a mile away.

"With pleasure, sir."

And the colonel sprang from his saddle, into which the rescuer vaulted, without aid of stirrup, and darted away in chase of the now flying red-skins, while he called back:

"Arm yourself with those dead men's weapons, sir, and await me!"

"Well, that is as splendid a specimen of manhood as I ever beheld! Did you notice him, my child?" said the colonel, with enthusiasm, as he walked toward the spot where lay the two dead savages and horse.

"Yes, sir; and a braver man I never saw. We owe him our lives, father, and he risked his to save us."

"He did, indeed; but, let me remove this saddle and bridle from his dead horse."

This the colonel quickly did, and carried them over to where lay their dead pursuers.

The eyes of Adèle, meanwhile, were upon the chase, for so it had become. She saw the mysterious horseman mounted upon her father's horse hotly pursuing the three red-skins, who had managed to drive the animal of the first man slain before them.

But as they neared the guides' horses, feeding on the prairies, the repeating-rifle of the pursuer

opened rapidly, and, not daring to delay, the reds swept on toward the timber for shelter.

"A strange sight, father, and a gallant one—three men flying from one."

"Yes, Adèle; and, see! he sweeps around the two horses of our guides, and now is driving them this way. Ah! he has caught one of the horses, and the other follows."

"We are all right now, Adèle, and God bless that splendid man, for he has not only saved our lives, but my hand from killing you and myself!"

And the colonel turned away, deeply moved.

"And yet I am glad that I came with you, father; but, ah! what sorrow has not poor Ethan caused us!"

"He must be as though dead to us hereafter, my child, and when once we have turned our backs upon Texas and his deeds here, let us never speak of him again."

"I thought I was doing for the best in giving him a home here, but he went his own course, and is now a fugitive from justice. But, here comes our noble preserver!"

And the eyes of father and daughter were fixed upon him as he rode up.

They beheld a man six feet in height, hardly over twenty-five or six, and with broad shoulders and a form as erect as a soldier's.

He was dressed in fringed buckskin leggings, stuck into top-boots, and a gray merino shirt and hunting-jacket completed his attire, while a black sombrero sheltered his head.

His face was one to command respect, cast as it was with a perfection of feature that was striking.

Darkly-bronzed was his complexion, and his brown hair, worn long upon his shoulders, and a dark mustache made up a face at once handsome, resolute and commanding.

He carried a Colt's repeating-rifle, and a pair of revolvers in his belt, and the traps attached to the saddle, which Colonel Fontaine had stripped from his dead horse, showed that he was a plainsman, for these were his haversack of provisions, canteen, *serape* and lariat.

He raised his sombrero politely as he rode up, and smiling pleasantly, revealed a row of even, ivory-white teeth.

"Well, sir, it did not turn out so bad as it looked at one time, I am glad to say," he remarked in a pleasant way as he advanced, and, throwing himself from the saddle, he continued:

"I thank you for your horse, sir, for he kept me from a tramp on foot."

Colonel Fontaine and Adèle gazed at him with surprise and admiration.

He showed no sign of excitement, was wholly indifferent, it seemed, to what he had passed through.

"My dear sir, though you seem so calm over what has just happened, permit me to say that my daughter and myself fully realize that we owe you our lives. And more:—but for you I should have slain my own child and then myself, rather than have fallen into the hands of those merciless savages. You see, sir, all you have done for us!"

"I am glad I happened to be on hand, sir, to be of service to you and Miss Fontaine, for I address Colonel Horace Fontaine, do I not, sir?"

"You do, sir, but, how you know me I am sure I cannot tell, for if we have met before I am most remiss in my memory of your face?"

"We have not met, sir; but I hold the position of cowboy on Mr. Ethan Fontaine's ranch. I went to town to attend his trial, when I learned of his escape, and that you and your daughter had started for his home, so I hastened to follow on your trail, and was but a few hundred yards in your rear when you were fired upon by those outlaws."

"I am happy to meet you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"My name is Leroy Lamar, Colonel Fontaine."

"Permit me to also tell you, Mr. Lamar, how much of deepest gratitude I owe to you!"

The handsome cowboy found his hand in the firm grasp of Adèle's, and he blushed like a schoolboy, as he replied:

"Why, Miss Fontaine, it was just fun for me to fight those fellows, as they are worse than Indians and deserve no mercy."

"Worse than Indians? Why, they are Indians, sir!" said the colonel.

"Oh, no, sir, only make-believe, so that the red-skins may get the credit of their vile acts. These men belong to the outlaw band known as the Red Revolver Rangers. They knew you were going to your son's ranch, and meant to capture you for ransom, doubtless aware that you were rich; but, if you had refused their spoil, they would have put you to death without compunction. See here, sir."

He walked up to one of the dead men as he spoke, and took the feather head-dress from his head, revealing the forehead of a white man, while he said:

"Look at his hands also, sir."

"You are right, Mr. Lamar, and I believe with you they are worse than savages. You then are the manager of my unfortunate son's ranch, and know how sadly his career has terminated?"

"I know that he has met with trouble, sir,

and am glad of his escape. I met him a year ago, and, as I had lost my home and little fortune, I took the position he offered me as cowboy manager on his ranch.

"But we had better ride on, sir, and I will send some of the men back here to bury the dead guides and then follow, for it is but a few miles to your son's ranch from here."

Turning to Adèle, he said politely:

"Permit me to aid you, Miss Fontaine."

Without an effort he raised her to her saddle, and mounting one of the guides' horses, on which he put his own saddle and bridle, and leading the other, he led the way over the prairies on the trail to the frontier home of the young profligate whose red deeds had made him a fugitive from justice.

CHAPTER III.

THE GAMBLER.

ONE night, some six months after the scenes related in the foregoing chapter, a man was just coming out of a store in the city of Baltimore, and turning the key in the lock behind him, when a tall form walked briskly by, and the lamplight falling momentarily upon his face caused a start and exclamation of recognition from the one who had beheld him.

"That man! and here in Baltimore? I must be mistaken; but no! I could not mistake his face and form. I will follow him, and"—he left the sentence uncompleted, and thrusting the store key in his pocket, walked on after the one who had come so unexpectedly upon him.

It was a dark, stormy night, and he drew his own cloak more closely about his form as he hurried on.

The one he followed passed on at a quick, firm step, in spite of the slippery pavement, and turned into a brightly-lighted hallway with carpeted stairs leading to a club-room above.

The one who followed him also went in, but with an air of hesitation, as though he did not know the place.

An attendant met him at the head of the stairs, and he asked:

"Who was the gentleman who just passed in here?"

"He is a stranger, sir; but his name is here," and turning to a register, he ran his finger down a line of names and read aloud:

"Don Diaz Perdido—Mexico."

"Ah! thank you; he is the one I supposed; I will go in and speak with him."

"You must be introduced by some one, sir, to pass in here, for I do not know you."

"No, I am a comparative stranger myself in the city. Will not this pass me?" and he slipped a gold-piece into the attendant's hand, who answered promptly:

"You can go in, sir, and if you should be asked, say Mr. Wilmer introduced you, for he is away from town to-night."

The man passed on into a large ante-room, and at once saw that he had entered a gambling saloon.

A number of gentlemen were present, visible through several rooms that opened one into the other, and while many were playing, either at roulette, or faro, others were seated at private tables engaged in gambling with cards, while a few strolled about smoking and looking on.

A sweeping glance the last comer cast about the rooms and his eyes found the one he sought, a man with jet-black hair and eyes, smoothly-shaven face and a complexion so darkly bronzed it was almost the hue of an Indian's.

He was stylishly dressed, and leaned against a marble mantle, a cigar between his lips, gazing about him with the look of a person who was a stranger.

His face was one that could not be easily read, and his age could hardly be guessed within half a score of years, for he might be under thirty, and perhaps over forty.

The one who had followed him as the glare of the gaslights fell full upon him was none other than Leroy Lamar, the cowboy who had come so gallantly to the rescue of Colonel Fontaine and his daughter in Texas.

"He only saw me once, and at night, while he will not expect to find me here, so I will ask him to join me in a game of cards, for I must not lose sight of him again—no, never again."

So saying, Leroy Lamar was about to advance to where the stranger stood when the latter came quickly toward him, halted, gave him a searching look and said, politely and with a slight accent:

"Pardon, señor; I thought I recognized you; but as all are friends here, will you join me in a game of cards?"

It was just what Leroy Lamar wished; but, had the man really recognized him?

It could not be, and so he said:

"With pleasure, sir."

They found a table near and began to play, the Mexican having named the stake as a hundred dollars.

Cool as he had been in a game of life and death on the prairies, here, in a fashionable city gambling-saloon, and playing with the stranger from Mexico, Leroy Lamar seemed nervous.

His face was pale and his eyes restless, and each game he lost from the very first.

"You seem nervous to-night, señor. Perhaps the stakes are too high for you?"

And there was something of a sneer in the tone of the Mexican.

"No. I will double them if you wish, sir," was the cold response.

"With pleasure, señor."

And, as the Mexican spoke, his eyes fell upon a person who had just entered the room. He started slightly, and, rising, said:

"One moment, señor; but there is a gentleman I wish to speak to. I'll soon join you, and we'll make the stakes as high as you will."

He rose with some haste, pocketed his winnings, which were some thousands, and disappeared.

A moment after a shot was heard in the outer corridor, a cry for help, and, going to the scene, with others, Leroy heard that a detective, placed on guard there to capture a noted card-thief and escaped convict, who was pretending to be a Mexican, had been killed by the very one whom he had attempted to arrest as he was hurrying away from the saloon.

All was intense excitement at once in the saloon, and Lamar found that the one whom his opponent at cards had pretended to wish to see was the chief detective of the city and had doubtless been recognized by the Señor Don Perdido.

"I could tell them much of the man they seek, did I wish; but, no! let him go," said Leroy.

And he at once retired from the saloon.

Down the street he passed, back to the store he had left, and, opening it, entered and went back to the office.

Lighting a gas-jet, he sat down for a moment in deep meditation, and to his lips came these words, in a tone of intense regret:

"I used his money and lost it, so must replace it with my own, which is in the safe."

"Ah! five thousand dollars gone in a couple of hours, and to that man. The chief's words explained why—he is a card-sharp."

"This is a bitter blow to me, and—"

He rose, went to the safe, turned the combination and opened it.

Then he took out a number of packages of bank-notes, placed them on the table near the safe, and sitting down, began to count them over.

As he did so, he grew drowsy, and resting his head upon his hands, soon was lost in deep slumber.

When he awoke the gray of dawn was dimming the gaslight in the office. He hastily arose, threw the money scattered about back into the drawer of the safe, closed the door and left the store just as the porter arrived to open the place and sweep out.

As he reached the street the newsboys were crying out the news of the startling tragedy at the *Sans Souci* Club-rooms, and the escape of the daring murderer.

At nine o'clock he returned to his office, and was surprised to find there Colonel Fontaine, who seldom came to the store before noon.

The face of the merchant was white and pale, and he said sternly, unheeding Leroy Lamar's polite good-morning:

"Come into my private office, Mr. Lamar."

Without a word the young Texan obeyed, and locking the door, the merchant turned toward him and said:

"Why did you take twenty thousand dollars from the safe last night, Mr. Lamar?"

CHAPTER IV.

BRANDED WITH INFAMY.

"Sir?" and the young Texan sprang to his feet at the words of Colonel Fontaine.

"Do not get excited, Mr. Lamar, but listen to me."

"Seven months ago, at the risk of your own life, you saved my daughter and myself from death. I found you to be a simple cowboy, one whose history I knew nothing of, and who told me nothing of your past."

"You were the manager of my son's ranch, and had managed well, and, as you were educated and seemed better fitted to make your mark in the world in civilized life, I offered you the position of my private secretary, and you accepted it. Since you have acted as such, I made you cashier as well, and I have noticed that you worked early and late in discharging your duties."

"Last night I wished to see you to go with me to the store and get some money, as an important telegram calling me away from the city made me decide to take an early train."

"Driving toward your rooms, I saw you enter, just about midnight, the *Sans Souci* Club, a gambling saloon. I was surprised, of course, and also entered."

"I saw you at play with a man who was a foreigner, I was told, and you was losing heavily."

"I sat there, unseen by you, until the man you played with, and recognized as an escaped convict, pretending to be a Mexican, left the saloon, leaving dead behind him a detective who attempted to bar his way."

"That man, the chief of police told me, last night, for he was there, had been shadowed on here from Texas, where he was known to be a

chief of a band of outlaws, known to you by the name of the Red Revolver Rangers."

"This morning, unable to sleep after what I had seen—for, remember, how I had trusted you, Leroy Lamar, and that you had won my permission to wed my daughter—I came to the office early to get the needed money for my trip."

"You and I alone know the combination of that safe, sir, and opening it I found the cash drawer had been opened and from it had been taken twenty thousand dollars."

"It is false! false! and in your teeth I throw the lie if you dare accuse me of taking your money," and the voice of the young Texan rung as he uttered the words.

Colonel Fontaine arose with anger and replied:

"You had in the safe some six thousand dollars of your own money. That is there; but twenty thousand dollars of my money is gone, and this very day you know I have to meet notes for twenty thousand, and what was in the safe, with what you collected yesterday was to pay them."

"I am in a tight place, as you well know, from the forged paper I have paid of my unworthy son's, and yet, could I but have tided over to-day all would have gone well."

"Now, Leroy Lamar, have you gambled away that money, and thus brought ruin upon me and my child?"

The young Texan was as white as a corpse. He stood before the merchant, glaring upon him as though he meant to spring upon him, and twice essayed to speak, yet could not utter a word.

Then the merchant said sternly:

"Go, sir! Leave my presence, and this city. Never cross my path again, or, by Heaven, I will have you sent to prison. Now I spare you, spare you for what you once did for my child and myself. Go! go! or by Heaven, sir, I will send you behind iron bars if you hesitate!"

Colonel Fontaine's eyes flashed fire, while he pointed to the door.

Again did the Texan try to speak, but the merchant rested his hand on the office-bell, to call aid; and turning, Lamar left the office and the store.

"Heaven have mercy upon me, and upon my poor child!" and the merchant sunk down in a chair and buried his face in his hands.

For some time he remained thus, and then, arousing he rung the bell for his bookkeeper.

The two then remained for hours together, and, at last, Colonel Fontaine arose and left his office.

When he entered the library of his elegant home his face was white as marble and he looked ten years older.

Up to his side glided Adèle, and she said softly:

"Your face tells me, father, that you have found it worse than you feared."

"My poor child, he is not only a gambler, but I fear the ally of an escaped convict and murderer, now masquerading as a Mexican, and, worse still, he has taken twenty thousand dollars from my safe."

"Never! never! He may be a gambler, father, but he is no thief!" cried Adèle indignantly.

"My child, as I told you, I saw him gambling last night, and he lost thousands, which he had collected for me to meet my notes with to-day."

"The porter, Wiggins, saw him coming out of the store at daylight, and when I went to the safe I found the money all upset, and not as I left it last night. I had then four five-thousand-dollar packages in one-thousand and five-hundred-dollar bills, besides some other money in smaller denominations."

"Then Lamar had a package of his own in the safe, of six thousand, of what he brought from Texas and had laid aside since coming, for he would never put it in a bank."

"This package was there, in place of what he had gambled away, but the twenty thousand was gone."

"What did he say, father?" asked Adèle, in a voice that quivered with emotion, for her whole heart was wrapped up in the brave, handsome, mysterious man whom she had met on the prairies of Texas.

"He said nothing, yet seemed indignant at my charge against him, and then I drove him from my office."

"Father!"

"I could do nothing else, Adèle, than banish him, for he is guilty, and what he has done utterly ruins me. I have been almost swamped by the acts of your brother, and whose debts I in honor paid."

"It has left me on the verge of ruin, but I could have tided over and recuperated but for this setback."

"Now I shall pay those notes, close up my business, and, my child, we will not have five thousand dollars left in the world, when I hoped to have left you a large fortune."

"You dear, noble father! But is there nothing you can do to save yourself?"

"Nothing."

"My jewelry and—"

"It will be but a drop in the bucket, my poor child. All we have will square us with the world, and leave us, as I said, a few thousands, and I can begin life anew."

"But, father, you have the ranch in Texas, and—"

"Ah yes, your brother's place. Adèle?"

"Well, father?"

"I feel as though I would like to hide from the world; but it is asking too much of you, young, beautiful, and a belle in society—"

"There, there, father; I know all you would say; but I feel as you do, and we will go together, just as soon as you can arrange your business affairs."

"I am also anxious to go away, far from here, for my heart is crushed with all that has happened, and though I cannot believe Leroy Lamar a thief, I yet feel that there is a cloud upon him, some strange mystery which he will not disclose."

"Father, I am ready to go to the Texas ranch whenever you wish."

"But the danger of a life there, to bring you into, my child!"

"I will not dread the danger, father, and besides, you will have men on the ranch to look after your cattle, and they will be a protection."

"But there are no neighbors, no society, and—"

"We were going to hide ourselves, father, I thought."

"Ah, yes; then to Texas we go, Adèle," was the firm response, and with a lighter heart he hastened back to his office to meet the crash that threatened him.

CHAPTER V.

THE UNKNOWN.

SEVERAL months after the gambling scene in the club-rooms in Baltimore, between Leroy Lamar and the man who was an escaped convict, a man sat in front of a pleasant cabin home on the Texas border, enjoying a pipe.

Several fine dogs were lying about, as though resting after a chase, and a repeating-rifle stood against the cabin, with a belt of arms hanging on a peg near.

Upon the prairie, in front of the timber, in the edge of which the cabin was situated, were several hundred head of cattle and ponies, the wealth of the lone ranchman who had sought a home in that wild land.

The ranchero was a perfect type of border-man, for his form was physically perfection, and his face, bold to recklessness, yet with a look of resolution and nobility of nature stamped indelibly upon every feature.

He was dressed in buckskin hunting-shirt, fringed and beaded, evidently the work of an Indian woman; he wore a regular Mexican sombrero, and his leggings were stuck in the tops of what are known as cowboy boots, while a large pair of spurs with jingles were as much a part of his attire as was his hat.

His movements were quick, graceful and decided, and though he looked a trifle effeminate with his long brown hair falling below his shoulders and beardless face, he was yet one to do and dare aught that any other would attempt.

"Hello! going to have company! Had dinner a trifle previous," he said, in a light-hearted way as his eyes fell upon a horseman far across the prairie, coming at a lope toward his cabin.

He waited until the horseman was but a quarter of a mile away; then reaching for his belt of arms, buckled it about his waist, after which he resumed his seat in a rustic rocking-chair which he had evidently made for his own comfort.

In fact, he seemed to have an eye to comfort, or even luxury, such as could be enjoyed in that far away home, for his cabin had three rooms, was stoutly built, and the furniture if rude was substantial.

Then there was a shelf of books, a banjo and a rack of arms, from repeating-rifles to muskets.

"Well, if that pilgrim's face isn't masked I'm dodging the truth," said the ranchero, as the horseman drew nearer, and he called out:

"Coon!"

"Yas, massa!" and a black of herculean proportions, and dressed in buckskin from moccasins to beaded cap—which last had a coon's tail as a tassel—appeared in the door of the cabin, from the kitchen, at back of the front room.

"There's a visitor coming that is afraid to show his face, so be on the watch."

"Yas, massa," and the negro retreated into the cabin, while the ranchero eyed the stranger.

He was mounted upon a large, long-bodied, jet-black horse, whose fine points at once caught the cattle-man's eye, and he noted also that the saddle and bridle were of Mexican pattern.

The horseman's attire was of black corduroy, cavalry boots and a sable sombrero, while his form was tall, athletic and indicative of great power and endurance.

But his face was masked completely with a wire shield, and through the eyeholes a pair of dark, piercing eyes fell upon the ranchero as he drew rein near his cabin.

He was armed with the inseparable belt of revolvers and knife, while a repeating-rifle hung at his saddle-horn, and gauntlet gloves covered his hands.

"If I can tell whether he's a white, Greaser, Injun or nigger, you can take my outfit," muttered the lone ranchero as he rose to greet the stranger, his hands on the revolvers on his hips, while he said:

"How'd'y, pard! Won't you 'light?"

"Thank you, no; but, are you Texas Jack, the Ranger Scout?"

"That's what the boys call me, pard; but my Christian handle is Jack Omohundro, at your service."

"I came to see you, Texas Jack, to seek your aid."

"You bet I'm on hand to help any honest man in distress; but I think I should like to know whether you are white, red or black, and what those who know who you are call you!"

"My name is simply the Unknown, for so I wish to remain, and as for the color of my face it matters not so long as I keep my pledges to you."

"I am on a red trail of revenge, Texas Jack, and alone on it, and those I seek are the outlaws known as the Red Revolver Rangers, under their Captain Don Diaz it is said."

"I have my doubts about his being a Mexican," said Texas Jack, vainly trying to pierce the mask before him.

"There is no doubt as to his being a murderer and a robber, and I have registered a vow to hunt him down. But, I am alone; and, though I shall dog the steps of the Red Revolvers at all times, I cannot deal them stunning blows without aid. What I would know of you is if you will help me when I call on you for aid, for I know you have a band of Cowboy Rangers under your lead?"

"Oh, yes, there a dozen brave boys scattered about here, within half a day's call, that will follow my lead, and we have hit several hard blows together, at times, against the outlaws, and hope to do so again. These men are known as 'Texas Jack's Terrors,' and they are terrors when on the trail. But, get down and have some dinner, yes, and stay all night with me, Pard Unknown."

"Thank you, but I had dinner a few miles back on the trail. You will help me if I send, or come for you?"

"Yes, I guess you are square, pard."

"I ask you to trust me without knowing me, I must remain unknown to you."

"If I send for you, this will show you who wants you; then come with your Terrors, following the bearer without dread. Here."

And he drew from his pocket a small pin—a miniature revolver cut out of blood-red coral.

"This is the hat-pin of the Red Revolvers," said Texas Jack, taking the miniature red revolver.

"Yes; keep it to compare those I send you with, and you may each time know when you receive one that there is one Red Revolver Ranger less."

"Keep them as a tally against me, and expect to hear from me at any time. So, good-by, Texas Jack."

And, turning his horse, the Unknown was away on the trail over which he had come.

He had gone several miles on the trail, when he glanced back and saw that he was no longer in sight of the lone cabin of the Ranger Scout.

Had he not just then turned in his saddle, he would have seen a man dart out of the trail into cover in a thick clump of timber a few hundred yards ahead of him; but, not seeing him, he rode on until, suddenly, there were three sharp revolver-shots from an ambush!

The man in the mask reeled in his saddle as though hard hit, while his horse plunged forward, reared and fell backward, dead.

But, though the rider fell heavily, he was rising to his feet when three men sprung from the thicket and advanced upon him, firing as they came.

Kneeling upon one knee, he met them with a shot which brought down one of the trio just as a bullet cut along the top of his head, and he fell backward.

The other two assassins were dressed in black, from sombrero to boots, and carried in their hands revolvers painted red.

They gave a cry of triumph as they saw their victim fall, and were rushing toward him, when, suddenly, there was heard a sound, roaring, rushing, like unto many hoofs, and out of the timber dashed a strange, startling foe directly upon them!

It was a herd of wild steers, leaping, plunging, fairly flying down upon them, but, strangest of all, they had a leader!

That leader, an enormous jet-black steer, with long, massive horns, had a rider on his back, a man with a flowing white beard, and dressed in the skins of wild beasts, even to a wolf-skin cap.

In his hands he held a rifle, which he brought to his shoulder as he beheld the scene before him—the fallen Unknown and his horse, the dead Red Revolver Ranger, and the two others

standing as though struck dumb and appalled at the startling sight of the charging steers and their wild-looking leader.

"The Mad Hermit! The Mad Hermit!" shouted the Red Revolver Rangers, and in terror fled, even forgetting to use their revolvers to try and check the rush of the flying steers and their mad rider.

CHAPTER VI.

TEXAS JACK MAKES A DISCOVERY.

"COON?"

"Yas, Massa Jack," and the Ranger Scout's sable man-of-all-work appeared from the cabin with a promptness that showed he had not been far away during the visit of the masked Unknown.

"Did you see that gent who called just now?"

"Yas, sah, I seen him."

"Where were you?"

"I had my eye at a rifle-port, sah, lookin' at him, an' ef thet leetle revolver he give yer hed been loaded, he'd never 'a' heerd it go off, sah."

"I was sure you were ready for business, Coon."

"Yas, sah, I allus is; I hed him kivered, sah."

"Well, what is he, Coon?"

"De Lord on'y knows, Mars' Jack."

"He looks like a trump card."

"He do look like a man, sah, an' no mistake; but he seem afeerd ter show his countenance."

"I half believe he is a Red Revolver Ranger himself, Coon."

"Lordy, Mars' Jack, let's cortch him, fer de scalp of dem Red Revolver men brings money, sah."

"Yes, but that man would not let his scalp be taken easily, Coon, and I might lose mine," and he ran his hand caressingly through his brown curling locks.

"Me too, sah."

"Do you think he could scalp you, Coon?"

"Wa-al, sah, it hain't easy ter scalp a nigger or a bald-headed man, but he might try."

"Well, I don't wish him to think I am following him, Coon, but I intend to strike his trail all the same, so signal the boys."

"All of 'em, sah?"

"Yes, for that man may have been a Red Revolver himself, come to see what he could find out, and if my Terrors were here, so that the band could strike."

"Yes, call them all, and if anything turns up, we will be ready for them. I admit that I am very curious about that unknown pard of mine."

Coon made no reply, but returned to the cabin, and with a bundle in his arms made his way back into the timber until he came to an enormous tree.

A rope ladder, with small sticks for rounds, hung from this tree, and slinging his bundle on his back the negro ascended rapidly to the top.

There, among the swaying branches, was a small platform, covered with earth, and upon it some charred sticks.

Taking from his bundle some wood, he lighted it, and spreading over the fire some damp moss, instantly a dark smoke began to curl upward like a high, slender column.

The wind swayed it to and fro, but it was black and dense, and never broke, and as it rose toward the clouds it could be seen for many miles distant.

Then the negro descended from the tree and found the scout ready to mount and ride away, for a roan horse, that had been staked near the cabin had been led up, saddled and bridled.

"Hain't you gwine ter wait for 'em, Mars' Jack?" asked Coon.

"No, I will take the trail and mark it for them as I go, so tell them to follow as they arrive."

"Yas, sah, and some ob 'em will be 'long in a hour or so, for de smoke am wery black, you see, sah, and dat will make 'em hustle."

"Yes, it is black and curls up well. Keep your eyes skinned, coon, for that unknown gent may have made a round trail of it and be back upon the cabin, and not alone, either."

"Yas, sah; but I keeps my eyes open, I does, even when I se asleep, Mars' Jack, and he gwine ter hab strict attention ef he come nosin' 'round here on de sly, sah."

"I believe you, coon; but I am off," and springing into the saddle he rode off on the trail by which the masked Unknown had come and gone.

There was no better trailer in the Southwest than Texas Jack. He rode along with a simple glance now and then at the trail left by the masked Unknown, but that which few would have noticed any trace of to him was as plain as a prairie stream.

He was splendidly mounted, thoroughly armed, ready for a long time in the saddle, if need be, and utterly fearless, so he was a dangerous man to meet on the trail as a foe.

He had gone several miles from his cabin, slowly following the trail of the Unknown, when he came to a narrow and wild-looking valley.

There was timber beyond, and a stream flow-

ing swiftly along as it came down from the mountains.

Suddenly the Ranger Scout drew rein and uttered a low whistle.

The ground in the valley had been cut up by the passing of many hoofs!

"Aha! a buffalo herd has swept along, and I am sorry I was not here sooner to get a good steak or two."

"This rubs out the trail I was following, so I have to look for it—ah! those are not buffalo-tracks, but wild steer-hoofs, and they were going a-flying, too!"

He turned a bend in the valley and suddenly drew rein.

There before him lay a dead horse, and not far away a human form.

But, both horse and rider had been trampled almost out of all shape!

Instantly Texas Jack sprang to the ground, and approached the dead human form.

"It's the Unknown of course, for who else could it be? and yonder is his horse, for I recognize the saddle and bridle."

"Yes, and there is a belt of arms, too."

The scout looked about him for a few minutes longer and then muttered:

"Well, his end came quick; but who is he?"

There was some gold scattered about, which had come out of the hoof-torn pockets, and this, with the belt of arms, trampled and broken, and the saddle and bridle, the Texan took to a place near and concealed.

Then he returned to the spot where the body lay and began, with a hatchet unstrapped from his saddle, to cut a grave near by, while he talked half aloud to himself as was his wont.

"Well, all I can make of it is that he was caught in the valley and run down by the herd of wild steers. 'Yet it seems as though he could have escaped them, as he was well mounted."

"I can't exactly get hold of it at all, for, maybe, he was killed before the steers came along."

"What drove were they? I know of no one who has cattle up north-way in the mountains, from where their trail shows that these came."

"Yes, there is the old Mad Hermit and his herd, I have heard so much about but never yet have seen."

"Well, I'll see if I can discover where the Unknown came from, for that will show where he was returning to."

After a short search he uttered another low whistle, which was his way of expressing surprise, and that he had made a discovery.

His musing aloud revealed what it was that he had discovered, for he said:

"Aha! that man was not killed by the herd of wild steers, for there was an ambush here!"

"Yes, three men, by their tracks, crouched here, and I'll follow their trail."

He went a short distance, and in a thicket discovered where three horses had been hitched.

This told his practiced eyes, as he was skilled in reading prairie signs, that three men had hitched their horses in the thicket and then laid in ambush over among the rocks, and who could it be but the masked Unknown that they sought to kill?

Further search showed that the men had mounted in evident haste and retreated by the trail they had come, apparently satisfied with their work, for they had evidently sought to kill the stranger.

The trail which he had left on his way to the scout's ranch was found, but there was none following it back again, as had been the case up to where the wild herd had swept down the valley.

That the wild herd of steers had come to a halt, doubled on their trail, and then gone on down the valley, Texas Jack also discovered, and this convinced him that the cattle had been those of the man known as the Mad Hermit, a strange, weird character of whom nothing was known.

"I'll just leave a line for the boys and follow the trail of those three horsemen."

"After all, the Unknown may have been an avenger on the trail of the Red Revolvers, and that is why he was ambushed here and killed."

So saying, the Texan wrote a few lines on a slip of paper, stuck it on a stick in his trail, and mounting, rode on his way again.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERIOUS HERDER.

For miles and miles around not a habitation, not a trace of civilization was visible, and not as far as the eye could reach could a curling smoke be seen, so that one would not have expected to find a lone dweller so far from his human kind, in the wild fastnesses of a mountain range that seemed to be even untrodden by the foot of the red-man.

But, away up in a canyon, that penetrated a range, was a small cabin hidden away among the crevices of the rocks that were above and upon all sides.

There was the head of the canyon, and it was the waterway of a stream that was in the valley beyond, a valley up among the highlands.

It was a lovely spot, this valley, stretching several miles away, and hemmed in by precipitous sides clad with heavy timber.

A stream, the one that found an outlet through the canyon, formed in the head of the valley, from streams that plunged down from the higher mountain-sides.

There were groups of timber, vast lawns of rich grass, and the whole was under the sweep of the eyes of the dweller in the little cabin, which stood like a sentinel, or fort, guarding the canyon entrance into the valley.

The meadowlands were dotted with cattle, the large, wild steers of Texas, and there were a hundred or more grazing about on the rich grass, and as securely hemmed in as though they were in a corral made by man.

The cabin which commanded the entrance to the valley and the head of the long, winding canyon, was a stout structure, built of logs, and situated, as I have said, amid a mass of rocks.

Its approach was by a trail from the valley, for it stood on a spur overhanging the canyon, sixty feet below.

From the door of the canyon a view could be obtained for half a mile down the canyon, and gazing in the opposite direction the eyes could sweep along the valley for miles and to the mountains beyond.

There were two rooms in the cabin, and they were rudely fitted up, though not uncomfortable.

In front of the door was a porch, with a hammock swung between the posts and an easy-chair—both the hammock and chair being the work of the dweller in that lone home.

Upon one side of the door hung a Mexican saddle with trappings like a harness attached to it, and a long lance with red streamers stood near with something like a very odd bridle hanging on a wooden peg.

A rifle, to which was attached a strap, a belt of arms, consisting of two revolvers and a knife, were also on pegs at one side of the door, out of which came the dweller in this faraway habitation.

It was a man with long, snow-white beard and hair, tall and erect form, slender and wiry, and dressed in the skins of wild beasts, that gave him a weird, savage appearance.

His eyes were jet-black, fiery, and his face stern, for even his white hair and beard had not softened the look resting upon it, a look that was hard, relentless and merciless.

It was the hour of noon. He had just finished his dinner, for he took from his pocket a pipe, and filling it leisurely sat down in the rustic easy-chair and began to smoke with the air of one who found in it great solace.

Having finished his pipe he raised to his lips a small horn, skillfully carved, and blew a long, winding note, repeating it several times.

With the first note the cattle in the valley raised their heads, listened, and stood until the sound died away in echoes among the hills.

Then there was a movement among them, and a large black steer dashed ahead of the herd and was immediately followed by the others.

They came on at a swinging trot, down the valley, directly toward the head of the canyon, while the dweller in the cabin buckled on his belt of arms, swung his rifle over his shoulder, and, carrying his saddle and the long lance, walked down the narrow trail to the valley.

Where he halted it was seen that a fence of stout logs had been built across the head of the canyon, with a pair of bars in one end.

Up to this fence the herd of cattle came at a trot, and the black steer halted near the man who stood awaiting him.

It was a magnificent animal, with jet-black hide, glossy as silk, and horns that were of vast spread and sharp as a spear-head.

Without any dread of the man, the splendid beast walked up to him, while the herd halted at a respectful distance, and were seen to be also each and all of them the finest of cattle, long bodied, neat-limbed and with tremendous horns.

"Well, Monarch, we will take the trail this morning," said the man, as he patted the animal affectionately, and then threw over him the saddle with its harness attached.

It was soon strapped on, and fitted perfectly.

Then the odd bridle was slipped over the black steer's head, and a coiled lariat was hung on the saddle-horn ready for use.

The rifle was swung by its strap on the other side, and then the strange ruler of this wild herd stepped to the bars and let them down.

"Come!" he said, and up trotted the herd and through into the canyon until half a hundred had gone through.

He held up his hand, and the obedient animals crowding toward the bars, halted suddenly, turned and went back to their feeding once more.

Closing the bars, the man mounted his splendid horned steed, and going to the front of the others set off down the canyon at a slow trot.

The black steer seemed to rather like "playing horse," for he ambled along easily, and the lance in the hand of his rider, rather than the reins, seemed to guide him.

When he reached the mouth of the canyon, over a mile from his cabin, the Wild Steer Rider came to a halt, and the well-trained beasts following behind in twos and threes stopped short as he raised his lance over his head, the red streamers near the pointed end appearing to be their guide.

Dismounting, the rider left his steer and walked along at a brisk pace for his years, to the top of a hill.

Peering over, his eyes took in a sweep of prairie for miles, here and there broken by timber mottes, and a stream that flowed from the range of hills.

He was about to turn back to his queer steeds when his eyes fell upon three horsemen riding out of a glen further down among the foot-hills, and their manner showed that they were following a trail.

"They are my game, and they are up to some deviltry," he said, in a voice deep and earnest.

Still keeping his eyes upon them, he saw them halt in a thicket, secure their horses and go toward a group of rocks in a valley.

"I thought so! They are lying in wait—yes, and their victim!"

His eyes rested upon a horseman as he spoke, coming across the prairie, a mile or more distant, and heading toward the very spot where the three men were now ambushed.

"I'll spoil their game and take a scalp more," he said sternly, and he walked back to his steer, mounted and rode slowly along the base of the foot-hills to where a glen led through into the valley.

As he reached the valley he heard the crack of revolvers, and with a cry to the huge black animal he bestrode he dashed forward like the wind, followed by his half-hundred wild steers charging like mad after their leader.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAD HERMIT.

WHEN the strange rider, whom the two men had called the Mad Hermit, dashed down the valley, upon the scene where the Unknown had stood at bay against his three foes, he saw the situation at a glance.

Whoever he was, or what he might be, he saw one man against three, and so he rode to the rescue.

One of the trio of ambushers had fallen under the fire of the Unknown, and the other two beheld the rush of the cattle upon them before they could fly to a place of refuge.

They saw that they would have to stand and fight it out with the Mad Hermit and his wild steers, or be trampled under foot; so they opened fire upon the mad rider, hoping to sway him from his path.

But, he also opened fire and held straight on down the valley.

The movement of the black steer prevented his getting a good aim, so his bullet tore through the flesh only of the arm of one of the men.

At the same time the other had fired with a true aim, for the Mad Hermit reeled and fell from his saddle just before he reached the two assassins.

That saved them, for the black steer came to a sudden halt and the rest of the steers, in their mad run, swept on by him, dividing on either side, and thus the two ambushers were saved.

They saw that there was hope when death seemed sure, and away they fled with the speed of deers toward their horses, for the black steer was roaring in tones of thunder at the fall of his rider, and the others were answering his call and coming to a halt.

At the same time a shot flew by them, coming from the spot where the Unknown had fallen, and they saw him rise to his feet.

They were now more terrified, and only sought safety in a more hurried flight.

Their dead comrade they left where he had fallen, trampled out of shape by the steers' hoofs, as they swept over him, and along the ridge they went, leading the riderless horse with them.

The Unknown at once came toward the fallen Hermit, by whom the black steer stood, bellowing loudly, and thus recalling his scattered herd.

He seemed to feel that the Unknown was no foe, for he let him approach the Hermit and bend over him.

Removing his own sombrero the Unknown ran his hand over his head, where the bullet of one of the ambushers had wounded him, and in a low tone he muttered:

"It was a close call for me, and I am dazed now; but I must look to this old man, for he is not dead."

As he spoke the Hermit showed signs of returning consciousness, and, as his eyes opened, said quickly:

"You did not fire that shot at me?"

"No, it was the men who sought to kill me; but they have gone, and I am glad to see you better."

"Yes, the bullet glanced on my rib, I guess, for it has not entered, and the fall stunned me."

"Who are you?"

"An avenger!"

"Aha! then we are comrades, for I live only to hate. Where is your home?"

"I have none."

"Then come with me. I must get back at once, for I am worse hurt than I thought."

"You were mounted?"

"Yes, my horse lies yonder."

"Get your rig and put it upon one of my steers."

As he spoke he placed his horn to his lips and gave a winding call.

Instantly the herd ceased bellowing and pawing the dust, seemingly in fright and anger, and came trotting toward their master.

With the aid of the Unknown he rose to his feet and mounted his black steer, which stood with the utmost patience by his side.

"Now, get your saddle and throw it upon that large white beast," the Hermit ordered, as the herd came up.

He held his lance in the air to check their advance, while he pointed out an animal fully as large and fine as the black he was mounted on.

"Be still, Snow!" he commanded, sternly, and the white steer stood perfectly quiet while the Unknown threw his saddle across his back and mounted.

"Come, Snow," and the white steer trotted alongside of the black while the Hermit led the way back up the valley.

His bronzed face was pale, and the Unknown could see that he suffered, while he set his teeth hard from time to time from any sudden movement of the black animal he rode.

"Who were those men who attacked you?" the wild rider suddenly asked the Unknown.

"Red Revolver Rangers."

"Ah! you know them, then?"

"I have had reason to do so."

"So have I; but were they pursuing you?"

"No, they ambushed me."

"You killed one?"

"Yes, and one wounded me here," and he raised his sombrero.

"I see. You are a cool fellow indeed; but are you a Texan?"

"Yes."

"And you are on the trail of revenge?"

"Yes."

"Your name?"

"I do not care to make it known, sir."

"And you keep your face masked because you do not wish to be known?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Men call you the Mad Hermit."

"Yes, the Mad Hermit, and wonder it is that I am not mad, after all I have gone through," was the bitter response.

Then, after a silence of some minutes, he said:

"I believe I can trust you, unknown as you are to me, and masked, for you came to my aid, untrilled by my wild steers."

"I thought you needed help, sir."

"Yes, and though you needed help yourself, you sought to aid me. Your saying that you are on a trail of revenge, and that the Red Revolvers are your foes, make us akin in feeling, so let us be friends."

"I certainly am willing, sir; but whither do you go now?"

"To my Hermit's Den, where you will be welcome."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your hospitality, as it is said that you never speak to any man."

"Yes, I live apart, and I almost hate all men, and God knows I have had cause to hate some of the race. What else do folks say of me, comrade?"

"That you are relentless in your trail of those who have wronged you, live apart in the mountains, and have your herd trained as thoroughly as horses can be."

"You see for yourself what they are. These animals that we are mounted on are as good to ride as horses. They are all obedient to my gesture, or call, and woe be unto those who stand in my way when my wild steers follow me in a charge!"

"If they had not divided when I fell, and passed to either side, those two devils who fled would have been trampled to death."

"But, if we are to be pards, I must have a name to call you by."

"Call me Unknown, for I have vowed I shall be unknown to my fellow-men until I have accomplished two purposes I am pledged to."

"Very well; I shall not ask you to break your vows."

"The Red Revolvers are your foes?"

"Yes."

"And they are mine; but, remember, if you are to be my guest, you are to keep it secret about my home."

"Certainly; I have no one but myself; but unless you are wounded badly and need my aid, I will go my way now."

"No, I am wounded more seriously than I thought, and I need you. My name is Lamar."

"Lamar! Great God!" gasped the Unknown, and he peered fixedly through the holes in his wire mask at the man by his side.

"Yes, and I do not wonder at your surprise, for I have long been considered dead."

"If you know aught regarding me, then you know that one I loved and cared for, like the

snake warmed to life, struck at my heart and destroyed those most dear to me, ruined me in fortune, and left death and destruction behind him, while he dragged me away to force from me a secret of where I had a buried treasure."

"Men thought that he had killed me, as he had those whom I had loved; but I did not die; I lived!—lived to avenge the dear ones, and—yonder is my home, and when we have turned the cattle loose, you must aid me to my cabin, for I am hard hit after all, I fear, and—Why, man, what ails you?"

"Nothing!" was the hoarse reply. "Let me aid you, sir," and springing to the ground, he let down the bars, lifted the Hermit from his saddle, and, having taken the saddles off the steers, aided him up to the cabin with a strength which caused the old man to say:

"You possess wondrous strength, sir, for I am no featherweight."

Having placed the Hermit upon his cot-bed, the Unknown said:

"To you, sir, I shall be no longer unknown, for I will tell you who I am," and as he spoke, he removed the mask from his face.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RED REVOLVER RANGERS.

In a timber motte, through which ran a crystal stream, bordered upon one side by a vast, rolling prairie, and upon the other by a ridge of hills, a party of horsemen were encamped.

They were a wild, picturesque set of fellows, with their border costumes, broad sombreros and darkly-bronzed faces, and that they were mostly Mexicans their appearance indicated, both in their jet-black hair and eyes, swarthy faces, and their dress.

One peculiarity most striking was that they carried no rifles and their revolvers were painted red.

Two of such weapons were in the belt of every man, and a little distance off their saddles were hanging to trees, near where their horses were staked out feeding, and in the holsters on each saddle-horn were other revolvers, also of the same crimson hue.

There were full a score of horsemen, and they were nearly all gathered in groups gambling, and playing for large stakes, as the piles of gold on their *serapes*, which they used for a table, showed.

Before several men were diamond rings, watches and chains, the stakes of those who had lost all their money.

Standing in the edge of the timber was a sentinel on duty, and on the ridge across the stream, was another, seated in the shelter of a thicket.

Suddenly from the latter came a call in Spanish:

"On guard there!"

"Yes," responded the sentinel in the timber.

"Two horsemen, with one led horse, are coming."

"All right," and the sentinel in the edge of the timber, who could not see as far out on the prairie as the man on the hill across the stream, kept his eyes riveted upon the horizon for the crossing of those whom his brother-guard had reported.

At the call of the sentinel the gamblers had hesitated in their playing, and all was silence until they had heard just what was said.

Then, as though they had nothing to dread from the men and a led horse, they continued their game.

Fifteen minutes after those reported came in sight of the sentinel in the timber, and he kept his eyes upon them until they were near, when he called out:

"Halt!"

"Red Revolvers," was the instant response, and merely as a matter of form, for they were recognized by the man on duty.

Riding into the timber they dismounted, hitched their horses, and merely nodding to their comrades, walked over toward the banks of the stream, where lay a man upon a gayly-colored *serape* engaged in reading.

He was dressed as a Mexican, wore massive spurs, and a sombrero embroidered with gold, while a sash of red encircled his waist, around which was buckled a belt in which were stuck a pair of red revolvers.

The man arose as the men approached, and with seeming interest turned upon them.

He was tall, well-formed, and his face was one to win admiration for its good looks, dread for the sinister, cruel expression that rested upon it.

There was a smile upon the lips, but not a sincere one, for it was more like a sneer.

His eyes were piercing, restless, and had a look in them of utter fearlessness, and where they might fascinate a woman, they yet were eyes to be afraid of.

"Well, Antonio, what news bring you?" demanded the man just described, as he bent his gaze full upon the face of one of the two men, while the other seemed to feel that he was regarding him also.

"Señor Chief, Lopez and myself come back without Señor Carlos, for he is dead."

"Ah! then you have had trouble?"

"Yes, Señor Chief."

"With the man on whose trail I sent you?"

"Yes, señor."

"If he is dead, then we can readily spare Señor Carlos," was the unfeeling reply.

"He is dead, Señor Chief."

"Then you get your reward I promised you, Antonio, and shall take the place of Señor Carlos as my lieutenant."

"Oh, thank you, señor."

"I need no thanks, for you deserve the place for killing that bloodhound that has dogged our trail the past few months. Tell me of your killing him."

"Yes, chief, I will. We followed his trail to the south, and it bore away in the direction of the ranch of the Scout Ranger, Texas Jack."

"Yes, and he also shall take the trail to the happy hunting-grounds, Antonio, for he is our deadly foe."

"Yes, Señor Chief."

"But to your story."

"We were following the trail slowly, when we saw him coming back, so we quickly took cover and ambushed him."

"We fired together, so there should be no mistake. His horse fell, and he half-rose and shot Lieutenant Carlos."

"We were about to rush on him, when, suddenly, down upon us dashed the Mad Hermit and his herd of Wild Steers—"

"Hal! that fiend whose life I have so longed to take!" savagely cried the chief.

"Yes, señor; he and his herd were upon us before we could fly, and we could only fire upon him."

"At our shot he fell from the huge black steer he was riding, and the herd parted, so that, strange to say, neither Lopez nor myself were touched, and we fled to our horses, while the savage animals dashed about, bellowing wildly, and trampling our masked foe, Lieutenant Carlos and the Hermit to death, while we barely escaped in time."

"Then the Mad Hermit is also dead?" exclaimed the chief, excitedly.

"Yes, señor."

"By Heaven, but you have done well, men, and I shall double your reward."

"Now Texas Jack and his Cowboy Terrors must go; then I shall redden every trail on the Texas border," and the eyes of the Chief of the Red Revolvers seemed to fairly blaze with fury, as he uttered the savage threat.

CHAPTER X.

THE WILD STEER RIDER.

OVER a Texas prairie a wagon-train was wending its way, slowly, looking like a huge snake crawling over the green grass, as the unevenness of the trail caused the vehicles to sway to and fro, and the leader wound here and there to seek an easy way.

It was half an hour before sunset, and the eyes of people and cattle were fixed upon a motte of timber situated a mile ahead on a rise of the prairie, and which fringed the banks of a swiftly-flowing, shallow stream.

The guide had said that there would be found plenty of pure water, luscious grass and wood, while the spot would be safe from attack by Indians, which emigrants westward had reason to dread, as well as a band of outlaws who were the terror of the trail.

There were in the train five families, four of them being a party who had decided together to seek a home in the far Southwest, and who were kindred.

These consisted of some twenty people, of whom half were children, and a dozen negro servants.

There were with this party ten wagons, drawn by mules, a carryall, an old family carriage and a buggy, with half a dozen fine cows, some sheep and hogs in one of the wagons, and a chicken-coop on top, showing that the emigrants were to start well in their new home.

There were also half a dozen horses, which the men of the party rode, with one exception, for a young girl of sixteen was mounted upon a pretty white mare, and her flushed face and beautiful eyes showed that she enjoyed the wild life on the prairies she was leading.

Suddenly she rode forward and joined two other persons on horseback.

One of these was a maiden, mounted upon a black thoroughbred animal, which she rode with the ease of the perfect horsewoman.

The other was an elderly gentleman who had the bearing of a soldier in the saddle, and rode a splendid bay horse.

He was dressed in a suit of corduroy, wore a sombrero, and had about his waist a belt with a pair of revolvers.

These two were not of the train proper, but had joined it some weeks back for protection.

They had five wagons, a large army ambulance, half a dozen negro servants and some cattle.

But why describe the two joined by the young girl from the van of the train, for they are none other than Colonel Fontaine and his lovely daughter Adèle, carrying out their intention of seeking a home on the ranch of Ethan Fontaine in Texas.

The merchant's business had been closed with honor, for every dollar had he paid, and then, with what he had saved from the wreck, a few thousands, he had started for Texas.

He had brought along some old family servants, had purchased what furniture they would need in their new home, with cattle, horses, farming utensils, and all to start life in a wilderness.

Hardly had they been three days on the trail, when Colonel Fontaine had felt like a different man, his eyes brightened, his dejection left him, and he said to his daughter that he was glad that they had come.

And Adèle?

Without a murmur she had given up her elegant home, her society and the city, and gone with her father, and one who had watched her closely would have said that she too was glad to go, to escape from a scene where she had known happiness which in the end had brought only bitter sorrow, for her heart was almost crushed at the thought of Leroy Lamar, and how her love-dream had ended.

"Colonel Fontaine, father told me to come and ask you to turn your glass on the timber, for I am sure I saw horses and men there awhile ago," said pretty Bessie Langley, as she drew rein by the side of the colonel, who with Adèle were at the head of the train.

Both the colonel and Adèle had taken a wonderful fancy to the beautiful girl, who was the life of the train, and the former remarked:

"If your bright eyes saw men and horses there, Miss Bessie, that settles it; but, what can they be doing there, I wonder?"

"I don't know, sir; but I saw them."

"Our guide is there."

"Yes, sir, but I saw more than one; in fact half a dozen; and when I noticed that no one from the train was missing, I told father, and he sent me to tell you."

The colonel had raised his glass and was closely scanning the timber, which was a couple of miles away.

Both Adèle and Bessie saw his face grow serious as he said:

"You are right, Bessie; there are horsemen there, and they seem anxious to keep hidden."

"But, our guide is there."

"Yes, a man I have never trusted from the first," said Adèle.

"True, Adèle, Mexican Mose is an odd-looking fellow, I admit, but he is a good guide, and, as we could not get Texas Jack, we had to take him, and certainly he would not have been sent to us in place of the scout if not trustworthy."

"I should hardly think so, father; but I fear him."

"And so do I, Miss Adèle," chimed in Bessie Langley, and she added: "Because he's funny and makes them all laugh, father and the others think he is harmless, but I don't."

"Well, I certainly shall not go on into the timber and risk an ambush, so please call your father here, Bessie."

Bessie wheeled her white mare as though she was on a pivot, and dashed back to the rear of the train, to soon return with a large, fine-looking gentleman of fifty, with long beard and hair tinged with gray.

"Mr. Langley, Bessie is right, for there are half a dozen men yonder in the timber, which I saw with my glass, and now many more I do not know."

"And Mexican Mose is there, colonel?"

"Yes, he went on ahead from our noon camp, and said he would wait for us here, for he described the night's camping-place."

"Then we had better halt."

"By all means, and prepare for the worst, while I will ride forward with several of the men and see what it means."

This was done, for the train was halted, the wagons being put in a semi-circle, and Colonel Fontaine and half a dozen of the men of the train rode on toward the timber, all thoroughly armed.

As they started, a horseman was seen to leave the timber and come toward them.

It was Mexican Mose, or Mose for short, the guide.

And an odd-looking character he was, for he was a Jew, with a remarkable hook on his nose, wore glasses, had long hair and bushy beard, and was dressed in a Mexican suit.

His saddle and bridle were of Mexican make also, and his horse was a slender-limbed animal, a cross between an Indian pony and American horse.

Mexican Mose was well armed, with a rifle and revolvers, and came on at a gallop.

"Why for you vas stop?" he called out, as he rode up to the party from the train.

"Because I saw horsemen in the timber yonder, Mose," said the colonel, sternly.

"Horsemen? Vell, I guesses you sees 'em, for you vas not blind, mine frient; but, don't be foolish, for dey vas Ranger mans, frients of mine, v'at I meets up mit in t'e timbers."

"Ah! we dreaded foes, for you know we are in a dangerous locality."

"Don't I vas know dot, ven I tell you so, mine frient? But come along mit t'e trains, and mine frients go mit us for couple of days."

"Ah! that is good, for we need all the help we can get."

"Vell, I goes pack and tells mine frients you vas scared, so dey comes out and meets you," and Mexican Mose turned and rode away, while

the colonel hailed the train and ordered them to come on once more.

Just as they reached the spot where the group of horsemen were waiting for them, there was heard a roaring, thundering sound behind, and all were startled at it.

"Indians!" cried some, and the train was quickly formed into a circle once more.

"Buffalo!" cried one of the men, and the men sprung to their horses and teams, fearing a stampede.

The sound was also heard by Mexican Mose, for he halted, turned in his saddle and looked back.

Then he was seen to signal by waving his hat, but not toward the train, but to some one in the timber, and immediately after there dashed out a score of horsemen toward him.

At the same time a startled cry arose from the lips of those who saw the large body of horsemen dash out of the timber; others uttered cries of alarm, as, suddenly, over a rise of the prairie, and coming along the train trail at wondrous speed, a herd of cattle came in view.

In the lead was a huge black steer, running like a race-horse, a rider upon his back!

That rider sat like a centaur. In his hand he held a long lance with scarlet streamers fluttering back on the wind; while behind him came a large herd of cattle, flying like mad, a couple of hundred in number, their hoof-falls and bellying as they ran making an appalling sound, fearful to hear.

The rider of the large black steer was tall, rode superbly, and was clad in black corduroy, top-boots with spurs, and wore a broad-brimmed sable sombrero, with a heavy black plume falling back upon his shoulders.

His hair was long and waving, but his face was completely hidden by a wire mask painted red, and his hands were incased in gauntlet gloves also of crimson hue.

"My God! they will ride us down!" cried Colonel Fontaine, as he saw the masked rider on the black steer, leading his mad herd directly down upon the train.

CHAPTER XI.

TEXAS JACK'S TERRORS.

A HORSEMAN was riding along a trail that led through foot hills, and thence on into a range of mountains far beyond.

He was well mounted, though his horse appeared jaded, and he looked like one who had ridden far and fared badly.

A roll of blankets was behind his saddle, a lariat hung at the horn, and a haversack of provisions on the other side.

His weapons were a revolver and a knife, and these were stuck in a rope about his waist which served as a belt, and was evidently a piece of his lariat.

The man's appearance, in spite of his unkempt look, indicated the gentleman.

His suit of corduroy had been a fine one, but was much worn and soiled, there were holes in his boots, he had but one spur and his hat had holes in it, and the rim was limp and flapped with every movement of his horse.

Altogether the horseman looked like one who had seen hard luck, and his face was pale and haggard.

Yet the stamp of refinement was upon every feature, and it was a face to admire for its beauty, though to dread as not wholly sincere, and perhaps reckless to a great degree.

"Curses on my luck! I can do but one thing now. Yet, why curse my luck, for I am alive, at least, and it is better than hanging, and surely—"

"Hands up, pard!"

His muttered words were brought to a sudden termination at the stern command, and the one who uttered it was hidden on the side of the trail.

The horseman did not obey, but dropped his hand instead upon the revolver in his rope belt, though he did not see his foe.

Instantly the crack of a revolver followed, and his horse went down; a bullet in his brain.

The horseman was pinned beneath the body, ere he could extricate himself, and in an instant four men stood over him, their revolvers leveled at him.

"Pard, we ropes you in, yer see, so talk surrender quick!" cried one.

"I can do nothing else; but, who are you?" was the sullen reply.

"We'll chin with yer when we has clipped yer claws. Yer hain't well heeled, if this is all," and the speaker took the revolver of the fallen man.

"That is all, is it?"

"That and the knife."

The one who had spoken thus far among the ambushed party, ran his hands over his captive's form, and said:

"I guesses you is correct. Now, boys, lift ther boss off'n him."

This was done and the captured man arose to his feet and glanced upon his captors.

He saw four men in cowboy costume, and with a gold star of five points on the flap of their broad sombreros.

They were well-armed with rifle, revolvers and knife each, and superbly mounted, for a

fifth man now came forward from the thicket leading the horses of the party.

"Now, pard, you do look in durned hard luck!" said the spokesman, and he gazed searchingly at the captive.

"I am, for the red-skins ran off my cattle and left me with what you see, and you have killed my horse."

"You are a ranchero?"

"Yes."

"Where's your lay-out?"

"Over on the river, near the Blue Range."

"I hain't heerd o' no cattle-man being fool enough to go up there; has you, pards?"

"I was fool enough," said the prisoner, while the men appealed to by the spokesman answered in the negative.

"Pard, you was a fool to go there, if you went, for it is nigh the Comanche country, and on the trail the Red Revolver Rangers take to go across the Rio, when we whoop it up too hot for them on this side."

"Well, I went there, and I lost my all; my partner was killed and I escaped as you see me."

"But you wasn't coming from the Blue Range?"

"Wasn't I? Then I have lost my way."

"Pard, does you know what we takes you for?"

"No."

"You is either a Red Revolver Ranger, or you is a fugitive goin' ter j'ine 'em."

Every eye of the five men who watched the prisoner saw him start and turn pale at this charge; but he answered quickly:

"I am aware that all men in this country who are strangers are under suspicion; but you wrong me, my friends."

"I'll not take oath that we do or do not—ho, Boy Buck, has you ever seen this pilgrim afore?" and the man called out to a horseman who just appeared in sight coming along the trail.

He was a young man, a mere youth, in fact, scarcely over sixteen, but tall and well-formed as a man.

His horse was the best of the lot, and his outfit, too, good as all were, and his hair was blonde and fell far down his back.

The name of the new-comer was Buck Taylor,* but he was called Boy Buck, on account of his youth.

Boy Buck drew rein and gazed fixedly into the face of the prisoner and then said:

"Couldn't your outfit take him, Brazos Bill, without killing his horse?"

"He was told to put up his hands, Buck, but concluded he'd draw instead, so I jist dropped his horse as a hint that we meant business. But does yer know him?"

"I think I do."

"Who is he?"

"I'll not swear to it, pards, but if I am not mistaken, he is wanted in San Antonio for murder."

"No! who is he?"

And all gazed with more interest upon the man before them.

"You have heard of the rich young ranchero who killed High Card Dick over a game?"

"Yes." And the answer was in chorus.

"Well, he was arrested and put in jail, and while there killed the jailer one night and skipped. There is a reward for him dead or alive, and it strikes me this gent is the one, for I saw him when they brought him into town from his ranch."

"I has heard o' ther gent."

"Are your name Fontaine?" asked Brazos Bill.

"Yes; his name was Ethan Fontaine," Buck said.

"I am not your man, gentlemen, for my name is not Ethan Fontaine, though I know him."

"What is your name then, pard?" asked Brazos Bill.

The prisoner hesitated an instant, and then replied:

"My name is Leroy Lamar, and I wish to know who you are that take it upon you to stop me in this way."

The men laughed, while Brazos Bill remarked:

"We! Who we is, yer wants ter know?"

"Yes."

"We is Texas Trailers—"

"In other words, road-agents!"

"Not much! We is Regulators, pard, and that severe on road-agents and sich that men calls us *Texas Jack's Terrors*."

"Texas Jack's Terrors! The man seemed uneasy at the announcement."

CHAPTER XII.

TEXAS JACK'S MERCY.

"YOU is sure about him, Boy Buck?" asked Brazos Bill, turning to the young Texan again.

"No, I will not be, pards, and I'd hate to harm a man on a guess; but he does look to me very much like the ranchero, Ethan Fontaine, though I only saw him once, and he is not Leroy Lamar, though he looks like him some."

* Since famous as the King of the Cowboys, and noted as an Indian fighter, scout and guide. Now one of the Texas heroes with Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

"But Buckskin Sam can tell you, pards, and here he comes."

As Boy Buck spoke, another horseman came in sight.

He was a small man, and with his long, ink-black hair and mustache, his piercing, dark eyes and bronzed face did not look unlike a Mexican, though in reality he was from Massachusetts and was known among his comrades as "Little Yankee," and also by a name that, like those of Texas Jack and Buck Taylor, has since become famous as Buckskin Sam.*

There was no more daring Ranger on the prairies, nor better rider, or deadlier shot, than Buckskin Sam, and he ranked as an officer in the band known as Texas Jack's Rangers, but which had become better known as the Texan Terrors.

"Well, Sam, we wants you ter meet a gent we has caught, and tell us if yer knows him?" called out Brazos Bill, as Buckskin Sam halted before the prisoner.

He bent his keen eyes upon him, and asked:

"Stranger, haven't we met before?"

"I do not remember you, sir."

"Didn't I once stop at your ranch all night, some years ago?"

"Perhaps you did, for I had a ranch up in the Blue Range."

"No, this was over on the river, and your name is Fontaine."

"So Boy Buck said, Sam; but he says his name is Leroy Lamar," Brazos Bill put in.

Buckskin Sam regarded him again, and said:

"No, Leroy Lamar was your cowboy, and I met him there when I met you."

"You are mistaken."

"I may be, but I don't think so. If you are the man I say, then, I'm sorry for you, as you'll hang, for we must take you to San Antonio and give you up. There's a thousand or so, pards, on his head."

"So I said, Sam. I thought he was Fontaine and not Lamar," Buck Taylor remarked.

"No, Lamar is a larger man, and yet they are something alike."

"Brazos Bill, we must take him with us to Jack's ranch and see what he says," and the prisoner, now white-faced and nervous, was mounted on another horse, which one of the Terrors led up, and the party started on the trail for the ranch of Texas Jack, their captain, for under Buckskin Sam they had been on a scouting trail for several days.

All of the men were rancheros, or cowboys, living on their own ranches, or with other cattlemen, within a radius of forty miles around Texas Jack's lone cabin home, who were always ready for the trail to punish the outlaw marauders or raiding red-skins.

The prisoner calmly submitted to his fate, though his sunken eyes and set lips showed that he suffered with dread of coming evil.

As the party, who numbered nine horsemen, neared the lone ranch, Brazos Bill rode on ahead to acquaint their captain with their capture.

He found the Texan scout seated in front of his cabin, engaged in making a horse-hair lariat. The coming of the Rangers had already been reported by Coon, his faithful negro companion.

"Well, Cap'n Jack, I hopes you feels better," called out Brazos Bill, as he rode up, and, dismounting, staked out his horse.

"Yes, thank you, Bill, my wound was not severe," replied the scout, referring to a wound he had received in a skirmish with Indians some days before, and which had kept him at his lodge while Buckskin Sam and the Rangers followed them.

"Glad to hear it, pard; but we has caught a prisoner."

"A Comanche?"

"Not any, but a man whose head is worth a couple of thousand, I guess."

"Who is it?"

"You knows the young ranchero who flew so high for a while at his lay-out over on the river, and who they said had dead hoodles of money?"

"You mean Mr. Fontaine?"

"That's him, Pard Jack, and we has took him, or, leastways, we thinks so, for Boy Buck and Buckskin Sam says as how it are the young cattle feller."

"Did you ask him his name?"

"Yes."

"Did he not tell you, Brazos Bill?"

"He said his name were not Fontaine, but Leroy Lamar."

Texas Jack bent his head over his work for a minute, and then replied:

"Well, he should know."

"Yes, pard, but folks is ignorant sometimes about who they be, specially when there is value set on 'em by law."

"True."

"You knows Fontaine, does yer not, Jack?"

* Buckskin Sam, Major Sam S. Hall, went to Texas as a boy and became a prominent ranger, scout and guide. He afterward returned East and won some reputation as an author of Texas and wild West romances, and died in the year 1886, in Wilmington, Del.

"I never met him, Bill; but I did meet his father and sister when they came here to his trial."

"Does yer know t'other feller, too?"

"Who?"

"Ther one they calls ther Cowboy Prince of the Rio."

"Leroy Lamar?"

"Yes, Jack, him as this pilgrim we cotched says he is."

"Yes, I have met him."

"Wal, you kin tell who he is. Buckskin Sam and Boy Buck says he is the ranchero as is being looked for, and is wanted in San Antonio for murder. But there they come now."

"Well, Brazos, we will soon know," and Texas Jack went on with his work, a strange look resting upon his handsome face—a look that cast a shadow over its brightness.

Then he called to Coon and told him to get supper for the Rangers, and taking a letter from his pocket, read it over slowly.

It was as follows, and dated at Baltimore:

"CAPTAIN J. B. OMOHUNDRO,

"TEXAS JACK:—

"MY DEAR SIR:—You may remember when my daughter and myself were in Texas called there by the acts of my unfortunate son, Ethan Fontaine, you rendered us many little acts of kindness, and told me if I needed your services again to call upon you."

"I now take you at your word, for, unfortunate and unlooked-for circumstances have caused me to decide to make Texas my home, and within a few weeks I shall start there with my daughter and a few faithful servants."

"We go to my son's ranch, and will live there, making it as comfortable a home as possible, and I desire to ask you to be our guide to the place, naming your own sum for your valuable services."

"We shall go to Shreveport, Louisiana, by boat, down the Mississippi and up the Red River, and from that point, where I am told I can secure all necessary for the journey, by wagon-train, for we will doubtless catch up with emigrants westward bound."

"We prefer to go across the State and would like to have you meet us at Waco, Texas, just two months from to day, and if impossible to come yourself, be good enough to send a guide whom we can rely on wholly."

"Not a word has come to me of my wretched son, and I begin to feel that he is dead, or else he would have written me."

"It were better so, perhaps, for it would break his sister's heart to have him hanged, and crush me into the dust, for with all of the sins he has heaped up in his life, we cannot but love him still, poor fellow!"

"My daughter joins me in kind regards to you, and hoping to see you at the appointed time, I remain, Sincerely yours,

"HORACE FONTAINE."

"Brazos Bill," said Jack, after he had read this letter carefully through.

"Yes, Cap'n Jack."

"Is it not strange that Pilot Paul has not put in an appearance?"

"He was due over a week ago, Jack, if he didn't meet any mishaps."

"I hope that he did not, for if he did, it means a mishap to Colonel Fontaine and his daughter—yes, and all with him."

"That's so! But Pilot Paul hain't no slouch, Jack, and as you couldn't go yourself to be guide, there was no better man among the Terrors than Pilot Paul, unless it be Buckskin Sam."

"And Buckskin Sam was away in San Antonio. I hope Pilot will turn up all right; but here come the boys and their prisoner."

As Texas Jack spoke the little cavalcade approached and drew rein in front of the lone ranch cabin.

"Ho, Captain Jack, we have brought you a prisoner, whose head is worth its weight in money," called Buckskin Sam.

Texas Jack glanced into the white face of Buckskin Sam's and Buck Taylor's prisoner as he advanced from the cabin; then he said, quickly:

"Why, Mr. Lamar, what have you been guilty of that the boys have roped you in?"

The face of the prisoner flushed, but ere he could reply Buckskin Sam cried:

"Jack, do you say that is not Ethan Fontaine, the fugitive ranchero?"

"Of course I say so, Sam."

"Then I pass," remarked Sam, with a bewildered look.

"Ditto me, pards!" cried Boy Buck, while Texas Jack said:

"Pards, you have struck the wrong trail this scout. Mr. Lamar, you must pardon them, for you do resemble the Fugitive Ranchero, Fontaine. But come in and brace up, for you look all broke up."

"Pard, I ask your pardon," said Buckskin Sam, stepping forward and frankly extending his hand.

"Me, too, Mr. Lamar," chimed in Boy Buck, and the suspected man replied:

"I cannot blame you, gentlemen," and he followed the Ranger Captain into the cabin, while the men went to stake out their horses.

"You are not Leroy Lamar, for I know you to be the Fugitive Ranchero; but for the sake of your father and sister, I save you from the gallows!" said Texas Jack as he entered his cabin with the prisoner.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FUGITIVE.

AT the words of Texas Jack the one he addressed again turned pale.

He had in his face the look of a hunted man, one who had known all that there was of suffering and wretchedness.

He bit his lips hard to hide his emotion and said, in a low tone:

"I thank you, Texas Jack."

"Come, brace up, for here is a drink for you; then brush up a little and come out and join us at supper. The boys will go home then and we can talk over matters."

And Texas Jack walked out of the cabin and joined his comrades, who were watching the culinary performances of Coon with an interest that showed they were ready and willing to do full justice to what he set before them.

Some of the men had brought in game, and this was soon broiling on the coals, and the men were ready for the feast when their late prisoner came out of the cabin.

He had washed up, brushed his hair and beard, and said, pleasantly, as he joined them:

"This is better, gentlemen, than being a prisoner, with the dread of being hanged for another person, I assure you."

"It is, indeed, pard, and we all regret our mistake," said Buckskin Sam, anxious to make up for his accusation against his captain's guest.

The others seemed to be of a like opinion, and the man who, a short while before, had been cast down and utterly wretched, was now the most cheerful one of the lot, and he said, pleasantly:

"The truth is, gentlemen, we tenderfeet come out here to Texas and think we know it all, and in a short while the Indians run off our cattle, and what they don't get the Red Revolvers do, and we are glad to escape with our scalps."

"Now, I lost all I had, and have been ill besides, so was just making my way to look up some one to help me try ranching again, when you took me in so cleverly."

"Don't speak of it, Pard Lamar, for we knows this ain't ther first time yer has suffered, for we has heard o' red doings afore around your home, and when thar war graves dug, too."

"But I for one says yer has a friend in Brazos Bill, and if it's dust, weapons, or horses yer want, I'll share with yer."

"And me, too."

"I am your pard for all I kin do for you."

"Count me in on ponies or cattle, 'cause I hain't got no dust, as I allers gambles it away, as soon as got," remarked an old ranchman by the name of Old Reckless, or at least that was what he was called by his pards, and his other name he had almost forgotten himself.

"I move we all go in and help Pard Lamar out," said Buckskin Sam, and a cheer greeted his words.

But the one they sought to aid, said quickly:

"My friends, I thank you most sincerely; but I am not in need of help, I assure you, having money enough, though all else is gone."

"I will soon be settled again, however, and you will always be welcome at my house, I assure you."

"Better join the Terrors," requested Brazos Bill.

"That's the rackit! J'ine us," cried old Reckless.

But just then Coon announced supper, and Texas Jack led the way to his table beneath the trees, with its board seats, for as the Ranger Captain had his men often with him, he had prepared the best he could to entertain guests.

For awhile the men were too busy to talk, and as their appetites were dulled, Texas Jack suggested that they start off as soon as possible on a raid to the westward, and if they saw nothing of red-skins or outlaws, to break up the next day and return to their ranches.

This they did, bidding their late prisoner good-by, and leaving him as the guest of the Ranger Scout.

For some time did the two, Texas Jack and his guest, sit in silence, both seemingly enjoying their pipes, and watching the sun as it neared the horizon.

At last the stranger spoke, and said:

"Why did you speak to me as though I was the fugitive, Ethan Fontaine, Mr. Omohundro?"

"Because I know you to be."

"We have never met before."

"Yes, I have seen you when you did not see me. I was lying in ambush on our trail once, for red-skins, and you and another passed near me. The other was Leroy Lamar, I now know, though then I did not know you apart, but I was aware that you were rancheros, living near."

"The red-skins were in sight, or I would have hailed you, but I let you pass on, and soon after the Indians halted on your trail and then turned back, and I followed them."

"When in San Antonio I saw you brought in as a prisoner, and was told you were Ethan Fontaine, and as Leroy Lamar has left Texas, I know you to be the one whom men now refer to as the Fugitive Ranchero. Do you deny it?"

"No, for it would be useless to do so to you;

and besides, you saved my life, and I owe you a debt of gratitude I can never repay. Why did you do it?"

"I told you: because of the regard I feel for your father and sister."

"What do you know of them?"

"I met them when they came to Texas to attend your trial, arriving after you had killed the jailer and escaped."

"Well, be your motive what it may, I thank you, and I tell you I have become desperate. I was wounded when I escaped, and lay at a ranch for months, cared for by one whom I had once known in the North."

"At last I was able to leave, and in disguise did so; but I was met by a band of outlaws, robbed of my horse, arms and money, and left for dead."

"When they had gone, I found that I was not much hurt, and I discovered a revolver some one had dropped, along with a bag of food."

"But I was very weak, and seeking a hiding-place in the mountains, remained there for weeks, sick and half-starved."

"One day I came upon a couple of Indians, and as they were upon me before I could fire, I surrendered, and was taken to their camp, as I believed, to be tortured to death."

"I was, however, not killed, though why I do not know, and one night I managed to escape, and, as good luck would have it, picked up a stray horse on the prairie the next day."

"This was ten days ago, and I was making my way into Mexico, when your men captured me."

"And Mexico is the best place for you, Mr. Fontaine, for if you remain in Texas you will be recognized, captured and hanged, for the two men you killed were both very popular, and when Texans could forgive you for killing a worthless fellow, they will not for taking the life of one they admire."

"Then to Mexico I go, at once," said the fugitive, somewhat nervously, for his sufferings had upset his nerves, in a measure.

"To-morrow you can start. I will fit you out with a good horse, weapons, and, in fact, all you need, and start you on the right trail."

"You are indeed my friend, sir."

"No, I act for those to whom you are dear, for Toby Herndon, the man you shot over a game of cards, was one of my dearest friends."

"But we will not discuss that. Pardon me if I ask if you have any money?"

"Yes, several hundreds which I was not robbed of, so well had I concealed it. It will be ample until I can make more."

"Yes, and I hope you'll make it square, and lead a different life; and when you do, drop me a line to San Antonio, that I may send it to your father and relieve his mind about you."

"I will," and the man's face clouded and silence followed between the two.

But the next day, well mounted, armed, and supplied with a complete outfit, Ethan Fontaine bade Texas Jack farewell and rode away from the ranch, a fugitive from justice, a marked and hunted man.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PRAIRIE PILOT.

THE "Red Revolvers" certainly had a most skillful leader. His pluck and soldierly talent, turned to a good purpose, would have won him high rank in the army; but, unfortunately, he was a man born for evil.

He had gone wrong at the first temptation, and afterward had let himself swim with the current, lead him where it might.

When driven to outlawry, he went upon the principle that misery loved company, and so he gathered about him a number of law-breakers and formed them into a band for their common safety and fortune-hunting.

He was eccentric, and so he dressed them alike, and made it a law that they should use only red weapons.

Rifles he would not allow them to have, for with revolvers only he could make them more self-reliant, and more feared.

No man joined his band who was not a fugitive from justice, and the pickings and robberies of all went into the general treasury for division at each quarter.

If some of the men noticed that the band just before "pay-day" lost heavily in men, and it was better for those who were left, they did not speak of the fact to their chief; but it got to be an acknowledged circumstance that it was the case.

Some of the men were alleged rancheros, others cowboys and mostly they were Mexicans.

There was not one of them who was not a fugitive from justice, either from across the Rio Grande or from some of the States, and a number of them were badly wanted in different localities in Texas, which they had hastily departed from for various and cogent reasons best kept to themselves.

The Red Revolver Rangers had no regular retreat that was known to their foes.

They were here, there and everywhere, or here to-day and gone to-morrow. That was one of the secrets of their success.

Their supplies and booty, mounted upon pack-horses, were kept constantly on the move, and away from danger of capture.

Their working men were sometimes for a month on the Texas trails, and would then disappear for a month or two, and rumors of their red work would come from Mexico.

Sometimes they swept through the country disguised as cavalry, and again as red-skins on a raid, but generally they were in their garb as fortune hunters without disguise, though sometimes, to make them more mysterious, their eccentric leader would mask the whole outfit, and no one would know if they were red-skin, pale-face or negro.

Their chief was more dreaded by his men than was Satan, and his word was law, be it for life or death.

To break a law of the band was to have death meted out as punishment, as the chief might command, and to secrete booty or deceive the leader also met the death penalty.

Sometimes the leader would have all of his men away on a trail, and in twos, threes, or separately, and perhaps half would be spying upon the other half, so that they were never sure of their comrades, or when the fierce eyes of their chief were not upon them.

Again he would disappear himself for a few weeks, and at such times the men believed he was really not gone far, but watching them.

Under such laws their lot was not a happy one.

But it was a paying one, and as there was safety in numbers they were glad to cling together, especially as in the eye of each man there loomed up the shadow of a gallows.

Some weeks before the scene at Texas Jack's cabin, when the Fugitive Ranchero, Ethan Fontaine, was brought in a prisoner, four of the band of Red Revolver Rangers were seated in a thicket on the side of a range of hills playing cards.

They were on the alert for a foe as well as for the winning card, and the quick glance of one cast out over the prairie revealed a horseman approaching.

"Pards, run the game out, for there are game fer us," he said, quickly.

All followed his gaze, and the game was quickly played to a finish.

Then the men crept further back into the thicket and watched the coming horseman.

He was on a trail that would lead him just under where they were.

They were not slow to take in the situation and its advantages, for one said:

"A lariat kin be dropped over him from here, and another over the head of his horse."

"Sure, and we kin yank him out of his saddle and, if ther tumble don't kill him, cover him with our weapons."

"Sart'in."

This was their game, and the four, with lariats and revolvers and the strength of a surprise, held trumps against the one man coming.

"Pards, it are one of Texas Jack's Terrors!" whispered one.

"Sure, and I knows him," whispered another.

"And who is he?"

"Pilot Paul, they calls him."

"Good! we has him."

The horseman now began the ascent of the hill and, to help his horse, dismounted and walked, the faithful animal following him without being led.

He was a man of medium size, of well-knit frame, clad in buckskin leggings stuck in the tops of cowboy boots, and wore a hunting-shirt, while a coat was tied to his saddle.

He had a belt-of-arms and a rifle was slung at his back.

A bold face, keen eyes, and set, determined lips showed that he was a man to fight to the bitter end or follow a trail to the death.

As he passed under the hill where the quartette of villains were lying in wait, at a silent signal from one, two lariats were lanced forth and downward.

The men who threw them were skilled lassoists, and the coils settled over the heads of the man and his horse.

The animal gave a startled snort and bounded forward, to be checked by the lariat, while the man was dragged to the ground heavily.

It was fortunate for him that in mercy to his horse he had dismounted to walk up the hill, or he would have been torn from his saddle with force enough to kill him.

As he fell he tried hard to free himself, but the men rushed down the hill upon him.

Still he was able to get one hand upon a revolver, and, though he could take no aim, he fired and one of the men went down.

In an instant a blow from the other felled him, and his revolver dropped from his hand.

"No use, pard, so give in, fer I doesn't wish ter kill yer," said the outlaw.

"I can do nothing else, you thieving scamp," was the reply.

The two other outlaws now slipped down the hill and joined their comrade.

"Nick's dead, pards," said the man who covered the prisoner with a revolver.

"Yas, thet game rooster called his chips in

only too quick; but I guesses he are valuable, so let us tie him on his horse and git to camp."

This the three quickly did, taking the precaution, however, to rob the body of their comrade of any valuables he had, though they had not the humanity to bury him, but left him as food for coyotes.

"Where are you taking me?" asked the prisoner.

"To the cap'n."

"Don Diaz Perdido?"

"Yas."

"Then I am done for," was the cool response, and the prisoner seemed as unconcerned as the others as to his fate.

It was night when they rode into the bivouac of the Red Revolver Rangers, and led their prisoner before their chief.

"It are the Prairie Pilot, one o' Texas Jack's Terrors, cap'n. We caught him with a lariat, but he got away with Nick," the spokesman of the trio explained.

"Search him," was the stern command, and the order was obeyed.

A buckskin purse, with some thirty dollars, and a leather wallet with a letter in it, were all that was found.

The chief started as he saw the address on the envelope, and at once breaking it open read half aloud the contents, which were as follows:

"RANCHERO'S REST, June 10, 18—.

"MY DEAR COLONEL FONTAINE:—

"As it is impossible for me to come to you now, and serve as guide to your new home, I send from my band one who is noted for his knowledge of the country, and the best guide you could have.

"His name is Paul Preston but, on the border, we call him Pilot Paul, and the Prairie Pilot.

"You can trust him thor. oughly.

"I shall take pleasure in stopping at your ranch to see you some day soon.

"Not a word have I heard of your son.

"My regards to Mrs. Fontaine, and believe me, with wishes for a safe journey to your ranch,

"Yours respectfully,

"J. B. OMOHUNDRO.

"TEXAS JACK."

"Baldwin!"

"Yes, chief."

"Lead this prisoner away, and if he escapes, somebody will die who is to blame for it."

"Yes, chief."

"Then send Mexican Moses to me."

The man bowed and departed with his prisoner, and, ten minutes after, the man sent for appeared.

"Moses, put on your best Jew looks and prepare for a long trip."

"Yes, chief."

"I wish you to guide a train west, from Waco, and I'll have a letter for you to give the commander in charge, and some written orders for you to follow besides."

"I understand, chief," and an hour after Mexican Moses rode out of the camp of the Red Revolver Rangers on a mission of mischief concocted by his chief.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MYSTERIOUS RESCUER.

It was an appalling moment to all in the train, when they beheld the strange spectacle of a herd of wild steers dashing down upon them like the wind, led by a human rider wearing a mask.

Then the Red Revolvers, as some of the teamsters now stated the horsemen to be, who had dashed out of the timber, were coming in the opposite direction at a sweeping gallop.

The train people were between the two fires, as it seemed to them.

In the train there were, with the teamsters and emigrants, twenty men and half-grown boys, with half a dozen negro servants who were also armed.

The women and children had been huddled into a place of safety in the center of the circle, for the wagons had been formed into a circle, the heads of the teams inward, and the cattle and riding horses also thus surrounded.

The cordon of wagons, if the mules and cattle did not stampede, might check the herd of mad steeds; but then the emigrants would have the Red Revolver Rangers to fight and stand off as best they could.

No wonder, then, under such circumstances, that the stoutest hearts were appalled, for, would the men of the train, brave as they were, be able to beat off the trained fighters the outlaws were known to be?

Adèle and Bessie Langley had both secured a rifle, and stood where they could fire a volley with the men upon the coming outlaws, while others of the train, women and children, were aiding as best they could to restrain the teams, and be ready to reload discharged weapons.

"I do not know which is the most to be dreaded, that herd of cattle, or the outlaws," said Adèle Fontaine, in a whisper to Bessie.

"Oh, see there!"

The cry came from Bessie, and what caused it was to suddenly see the rider of the large black steer wave a long lance that he carried, streaming with red ribbons, and dart away in an oblique direction from the train, when not a hundred yards from it.

The herd followed their leader, bearing to the right, and circling around the train.

Then up to the train dashed the guide, Mexican Moses, terribly alarmed apparently, for he cried out:

"Oh, my! oh, my! t'e outlaws vas charge up on my friends mit t'e timber, and kills dem, and now dey comes! dey comes!"

"Silence, sir, for I half-suspect you of treachery! Stand here by my side, and if you do not help defend this train I will kill you!" warned Colonel Fontaine, sternly.

"Kills me? Oh, Abrahams! t'e outlaws vill kill me, too!" groaned the Mexican Jew.

"What does that mean, guide—a man in mask, riding a steer and leading a herd of mad animals?" said the colonel.

"It was the Wild Steer Rider—the Mad Hermit—no, for *dat* mans vas wear a mask.

"Who vas he, mine fr'nt?"

Colonel Fontaine turned to the defenders of the train and called out:

"Men, we seem to have nothing to fear from the wild steers, so turn your guns, when I give the command, upon the outlaws.

"They must be beaten off, or you know the consequences!"

A cheer answered the colonel's words, and every man stood ready to do his duty—yes, and every woman, too.

But all eyes were now turned upon the wild herd and their masked leader on the black steer. He seemed to have intended to sweep by the train, until suddenly he had gotten opposite to it, when he again waved his lance and began an oblique to the left directly toward the coming outlaws, now not two hundred yards from the corral of wagons.

At this those with the train uttered a cry of joy, for what could the Masked Steer Rider mean but to cut off the outlaws in their charge, or check their advance?

The Red Revolver Rangers seemed to be surprised also to see the Masked Rider heading directly toward them, and their speed perceptibly slackened, in spite of the call of their chief to come on and break the herd's flight.

Adèle, who was also watching Mexican Moses, felt sure that she saw him turn pale and look anxious; but her eyes were now upon the Wild Steer Rider, for above the thunder of hoofs suddenly arose the ringing notes of a bugle, clear and loud, sounding a charge!

The bugle-notes were followed by a bellowing from half a hundred cattle, the black steer sounding the signal with a roar like thunder, and with still greater speed the Masked Rider led his mad herd right down to meet the charge of the score of Red Revolver Rangers.

Then followed a cracking of revolvers, as the outlaws sought to break the mad charge of cattle and kill the daring leader; but though several steers went down the herd pressed on more savagely; up to the shoulder of the Masked Rider went his repeating-rifle, when the fire of the Red Revolver Rangers was answered with deadly effect, for a horseman fell dead from his saddle and a horse went down.

Then, seeing that the mad rush of cattle could not be checked, the chief gave the order to retreat. The outlaws wheeled to the right-about amid the wild cheers of the train people.

In vain was it, trusting to the speed of his horses, that the outlaw captain sought to run away to the right, and thus dart around the herd, for the cattle pressed the flying steeds too close and they had all they could do to keep ahead.

Once again the rifle of the Masked Rider cracked, and the train people saw a horse go down and the hoofed herd sweep on over him.

Straight to the timber fled the outlaws, but too closely pressed by the wild rider and his dumb pursuers to make a stand there, and so into the stream they dashed!

Then the bugle-notes again rung out and the halt was sounded.

The steers, as though enjoying the chase or maddened by it, were hard to check; but a few sharp notes from the bugle and they obeyed, while the Red Revolver Rangers went on for safety to the distant hills.

Then back over the prairie went the herd at a trot, and, halting them near the corral of wagons, the Masked Rider rode up to where a curious and grateful crowd awaited him.

As he approached he was greeted with a cheer, and Colonel Fontaine pressed forward and said:

"My dear sir, whatever your reason for masking your face, or who or what you maybe, I thank you in the name of all here for saving many valuable lives and sorrow untold."

Suddenly the Masked Rider halted his black steer, and, wheeling about, rode away without a word in reply, followed by his wild herd.

CHAPTER XVI.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

THE strange conduct of the Wild Steer Rider was a surprise to all in the train.

He had rescued them from the Red Revolver Rangers by his splendid charge with his herd, and then upon coming to the train and hearing the word of thanks from Colonel Fontaine, had without a word, and with seeming rudeness, gone back to his cattle.

But, as they watched him they saw him halt

and seem lost in reverie, as though struggling with himself against some purpose.

Then he turned to his black steer and leaving the herd to feed about, came back toward the train.

In the mean time Colonel Fontaine had turned to Mexican Moses and asked:

"Guide, how can you explain the presence of that band of outlaws in the timber, when you had just come from there?"

"They vas not dere, mine fr'ent, when I comes away."

"There certainly were horsemen there, for I saw them."

"And so did I," put in Bessie Langley.

"Yes, guide, we must have an explanation," Mr. Langley said.

"Vell, dem horses and mens vat you sees, was mine fr'ents; but ven I comes away t'e outlaws t'ey comes into t'e woods, and kills mine fr'ents, and so it vas, beebles."

"This seems to me to be a lame excuse, and I confess that you have raised my doubts regarding you," the colonel said sternly.

"Vell, I vas do all I vas ables, mine fr'ent, ant if you vas not vant me, I go back to Texas Jack, and tells him you t'ink I vas bad mans."

"No, I do not say so, and I remember that Texas Jack's letter to me said to 'trust Mexican Moses, whom I send as your guide, with your life and as you would me.'

"Now I only say your coming from the timber, and the outlaws following you so quickly, caused me to feel suspicious of you."

"Vell, I vas sorry; but I tells how it vas."

"Didn't I run me away pretty quick ven I sees t'e outlaws coming?"

Before the colonel could reply some one called out that the Masked Rider was returning, and all eyes turned from the guide back upon the mysterious Wild Steer Rider.

He came up slowly, and halting near sprung to the ground, while he advanced toward Colonel Fontaine and saluting politely said:

"You command this train, sir, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, I have that honor."

"May I ask who your guide is?"

"Mexican Moses is his name."

"He is here," and the colonel turned to the guide.

But, with only a glance at Mexican Moses, the masked man continued:

"I would ask where you got him, sir?"

"He met us at Waco, and came with a letter from the great scout, Texas Jack, whom I had written to asking him to be my guide, but as he could not he sent this man."

"Is there not some mistake, sir, for Texas Jack would never send you a guide who was in league with outlaws?"

"Vat, does you say I vas von rascal?" and Mexican Moses dropped his hand upon his revolver.

But quicker than he was, was the movement of the Masked Steer Rider, who had his revolver leveled at the head of the guide, and said, sternly:

"Hands off your weapons, or I pull trigger!"

The guide obeyed with a muttered oath, and the Masked Rider continued:

"I repeat, sir, Texas Jack never sent you this man."

"I have, I believe, his letter with me."

The colonel, after a search in his pockets, drew out the letter and handed it to the Masked Rider, who read it carefully, while every eye in the train was fixed upon him.

His form was erect, his shoulders broad, and he stood firmly on his feet, a perfect ideal of manhood.

His face was masked with a wire screen that fitted it perfectly, and a curtain passed around the neck, while, as gauntlet gloves covered his hands, no one could tell whether he was white or black, as far as the color of his skin was concerned, though his voice was deep-toned and rich, and his manner of expressing himself showed the man of education.

He was dressed in a garb half-frontier, half-Mexican, wore a broad-brimmed sombrero, embroidered in gold, and with a tiny gold spur hanging from a Texas star on the left side of the flap.

His arms were a pair of revolvers and a knife, and another pair of revolvers were in holsters on his saddle, and a rifle was hung on the horn.

His long lance was stuck in the ground near his steer, and the red streamers were fluttering in the wind.

The saddle was Mexican, and altogether the outfit perfect, and that his face was masked made him an object of deepest interest and mystery to all.

All were silently regarding him as he read the letter, and then he said quietly:

"You have been deceived, sir, for I know Texas Jack's writing, and this is not from him, while among his Rangers there is not one known as Mexican Moses."

"He has sent you a guide, sir, and he has met with his death, perhaps at the hands of this man, and he has taken advantage of his discovery in the letter that the Ranger did write you, to play his game of deception and lead you into a trap."

"Hands up, sir!"

But as he turned to where Mexican Moses had been standing he saw that he was gone.

He had quietly slipped back among the crowd and was nowhere to be seen.

"He must be taken, sir, dead or alive."

"There he goes!"

The cry came from Bessie Langley, who discovered the guide as he sprang upon his horse and was darting away across the prairies.

"I will pursue him," said the Masked Guide, quickly, and, turning to Colonel Fontaine, he continued:

"Move your train on to the timber, sir, and go into camp; but keep guards on the lookout, for you must not be caught napping."

So saying, he turned and walked toward his waiting steer.

With a bound he was in the saddle, and the splendid animal shot away like an arrow in full chase of the guide.

Mexican Moses was full two hundred yards away and riding like the wind.

There was no doubt but what he fully realized his danger, and, without knowing who his mysterious foe was, he understood that he would kill him if he knew him to be an outlaw.

He also was aware that the outlaws had two bitter foes, one the Mad Hermit, the Wild Steer Rider, and the other a Masked Unknown.

But these two men had been reported slain to the chief, and now the Masked Unknown appeared as a Wild Steer Rider and was on his track.

Well mounted, Mexican Moses felt that he could escape, but a glance over his shoulder as he fled showed clearly that it had devolved into a race for life between him and the Wild Steer Rider.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LARIAT-THROWER.

EVERY eye in the train was upon the mysterious rescuer as he bounded upon his steer and sped away in pursuit of Mexican Moses.

They had at first regarded it as a useless chase, knowing that in spite of his sorry looks the horse of the guide was a very fleet animal, and would distance the black steer.

But while Colonel Fontaine, in obedience to instructions from the Masked Rider, called the men to again move on with the train, Adèle and Bessie mounted their horses and rode out upon the prairie to watch the chase.

"Oh, Miss Adèle, the wild steer is gaining," cried Bessie.

"You are right, Bessie; that steer is fleetier than the guide's horse."

"I hope he will catch him."

"If he does, it will be to kill him, and if there is a doubt, I hope the guide will escape."

"If he was not guilty, Miss Adèle, why did he run off?"

"That is true, and I never liked the man; but I do hate to see one man take another's life."

"I wonder who that masked man is?" queried Bessie.

"He seems determined to keep the secret to himself; but at first I thought him rude, when he rode away, but he was doubtless plotting some scheme, for he came back again—but see, he has gained and Mexican Moses is opening fire upon him."

"I do hope he will not kill him."

"I sincerely hope he will not, Bessie, and somehow I feel that the Masked Rider has a charmed life; but they have gone over the rise of prairie, so let us go on with the train," and Adèle led the way after the train which was just pulling out on its way to the timber.

Colonel Fontaine and half a dozen men on horseback, rode on to the timber, and entered it cautiously; but they found no one there, though they had passed the trampled bodies of two men, which the Masked Rider had slain and his herd had passed over, and a man was sent back to guide the train so as not to have the disfigured dead seen by the women and children.

The timber was a pleasant camping-place, and capable of being well guarded and defended.

There was the stream with the best of water, plenty of grass and wood, and the camp was soon made, with the wagons so placed as to form a means of defense against attack.

Fires were lighted, sentinels placed, and the emigrants settled down to make themselves comfortable for the night, but not without a dread of evil, for that the Red Revolver Rangers had been camped for some time in the timber, awaiting the coming of the train, the signs showed plainly.

Then too it was remembered that several times a horseman had visited the train on the ranch, and each time proved to be a friend of Mexican Moses, who reported that he was a scout, or courier, going on a mission of importance.

Now that the guide was suspected, in fact proven to have been treacherous, all believed that the visitors had been no other than his allies, by whom he had reported to the Red Revolvers the movements of the train.

What to do about the herd of wild steers, Colonel Fontaine did not know.

They were feeding out upon the prairie, where

their leader had left them, while he had dashed away after the guide.

The large white steer seemed to be the acknowledged leader of the herd, for he led the way to the stream, and, after the cattle had quenched their thirst, had gone back to feeding near where the Masked Rider had left them.

All the train people had remarked upon the fact that the steers were a splendid lot of cattle—clean-limbed, long-bodied, and built like racers.

They were of the long-horn breed, and certainly in a mad charge were to be dreaded as much as a cavalry squadron with sabers, if not more.

Then, too, they seemed to have been thoroughly trained, and the bugle or the waving of the red ribbons on the lance-end guided them perfectly and they were as disciplined as soldiers it seemed.

And, while a group were seated around the colonel's camp-fire discussing the adventures of the day, far away over the prairie Mexican Moses was flying for life, and slowly gaining upon his horse was the black steer with the Masked Rider.

Mexican Moses was evidently rattled at all that had occurred, for he had missed the Masked Rider and his sable steer at every shot.

The sun had just gone down in the west, when the full moon sailed above the horizon and lit up the prairie with wondrous beauty.

On sped the pursued and his relentless pursuer, and the black steer was steadily gaining upon the guide's horse.

The rifle of the flying horseman was useless, for he had dropped his ammunition, and he dared not risk his revolvers until it came to close quarters.

Suddenly Mexican Moses looked behind him.

There was a hill near, and if he could gain that he would stand at bay.

So he wished to see just how far his enemy was away.

If he had time to drop from his horse, dodge behind a hill and open fire, then he might after all kill his pursuer.

But as Mexican Moses looked back he gave a cry of alarm, for two reasons.

First, the black steer had suddenly increased his speed and had gained wonderfully in the last few minutes, and secondly, the horseman beheld a dark coil in the air, which had just left the hand of the Masked Rider.

The bright moonlight revealed all distinctly, and the fugitive knew that he was caught.

In that instant he tried to dodge the coil, but all in vain it was, for over him it fell and the line was drawn taut, while there came the stern words:

"Rein in your horse, sir, or I will drag you from your saddle!"

But Mexican Moses had the thought flash upon him that the black steer could not be brought to a sudden halt like a horse, and he hoped to get an instant's time to draw a revolver, pretend to surrender, and then let his adversary catch a bullet full in his heart as he rode up.

This was Mexican Moses's plan, but somehow it miscarried, for, in obedience to his threat, and as though suspecting the guide, the Masked Rider suddenly spoke sharply to the black steer, and the animal halted with a suddenness that would have unseated a less splendid rider.

At the same instant the lariat went taut with a twang, and the guide was dragged from his saddle with a sudden jerk and fell heavily upon the ground, while his horse sped on.

The lariat-thrower had captured his game.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GUIDE'S STORY.

THERE were few who cared to sleep that night in the emigrant train, other than the children, who were put to bed early that their parents might talk over the exciting scenes of the day.

All felt the seriousness of the situation, and from what they had heard of the Red Revolver Rangers, there was hardly one in the camp but who realized that their lives had been saved by the Masked Rider of the Wild Steer.

It was known that "The Don," as the chief of the lawless Rangers was often called, allowed nothing to stand in his way to get gold.

Life was cheap with him, and even his own men he set little value on, except as a means to an end.

Of course all he had been guilty of had been exaggerated tenfold, until he was looked upon as a monster in human shape.

It was said that his band had met and whipped in fair battle treble their number of soldiers, and that even Texas Jack and his Rangers avoided a combat with them.

Then, too, it was said that he had half a hundred men at his call, nearly all Mexicans, who were the bitter foes of any one on the Texas side of the Rio Grande.

Led into a trap as they would have been, but for the coming of the Wild Steer Rider, they would have been no match for the outlaws under their daring chief, the emigrants fully understood.

But yet their guide, who was not the one whom Texas Jack had sent, had gone off at full flight before the Masked Rider, and the desper-

rate Revolver Rangers had certainly been forced to fly before the Demon Herd of the Unknown Texan.

It may therefore be surmised that the mysterious Steer Rider was the subject of conversation around the various camp-fires that night in the timber.

The moon was at its full and gave all hope that the outlaws could not creep upon them and give them a surprise, and Colonel Fontaine, Mr. Langley, who had been the head of the train until it united with the "Fontaine outfit," Adèle and Bessie sat discussing the situation.

They were sitting before Adèle's tent, which she had invited Bessie to share with her, and had just eaten supper, which old "Aunt Nan," the negress who had cooked for years in the Fontaine family had prepared, and the colonel opened the conversation by the remark:

"I would give much to know who that strange man is, for somehow I feel that I have met him before."

"I have the same feeling, father, so he must be one whom we met when we were in Texas before," responded Adèle.

"True, for we met many of these wild, strange men, and they were most kind to us, too; but what on earth is he masked for, and why does he ride a steer instead of a horse and carry with him a whole herd of mad animals as though he himself was mad?"

"There was method in his madness this afternoon, colonel, and I believe he and his wild steers did what a band of men would not have been able to do, and that is put the Red Revolver Rangers to flight," said Mr. Langley, who was a man of education, who, having mortgaged his farm to help a brother in distress had lost it and been forced to seek, with all that remained to him, to find a home in Texas, whither his only child, Bessie, had accompanied him, for he was a widower.

"Yes, he saved us; there is no denying that fact, only I dislike the mystery about him."

"I hope he met with no harm at the hands of that treacherous guide," said Adèle, and as she spoke there rung out quick and sharp from the mounted sentinel some distance out upon the prairie:

"Halt! who are you?"

A voice was heard in reply, but the words were not caught, and Colonel Fontaine was about to go out to the sentinel when he was told that two horsemen were coming toward the timber, the man on guard having called out that they were "all right."

"It is the Wild Rider," said Colonel Fontaine, as the two drew nearer.

Dismounting, the Wild Rider staked out the horse of the man with him, and left his black steer loose to feed.

Then the horseman dismounted and the two advanced toward the timber, the eyes of all upon them.

A few moments more and they approached the camp of Colonel Fontaine, and those gathered there saw that the Wild Rider had the guide with him, but his hands were securely bound.

"Well, sir, I congratulate you upon your success."

"Be seated, please, and let me order supper for you," said the colonel extending his hand.

But the Masked Rider seemed not to see the extended hand, while he said:

"Thank you, sir, but I have not time to remain to supper, though this man can accept of your hospitality."

"You captured him without harm to yourself, I hope, and I suppose you feel assured of his treachery to us?"

"Yes, sir, there is no doubt of that, and I am determined to have him confess as much to you, so he can take his choice about telling the truth and being left with you to try him, and decide upon what is to be done with him, or to go with me, where his end will be sure and sudden."

At the implied threat in the words of the Steer Rider, Mexican Moses said quickly:

"Of it's the same, mine friend, to yourselves, then I stays mit t'e camps."

"It was safer to be a brizener in t'e train, den a dead mans mit you, don't it?"

"You don't fool me by that broken English, Mexican Moses, nor do I believe you are a Jew—see here, Colonel Fontaine," and by a sudden quick movement, the spectacles of the guide were snatched off, and with them a wig of bushy hair that considerably changed his appearance.

"You see that nature has endowed him with a most generous Hebrew nose, and he was made up as such."

"Now, sir, who are you?"

"I was told you, mine friend."

"Hold! talk English pure and simple," and the revolver of the Masked Unknown was placed at the head of the guide.

To the surprise of all the guide said in response:

"Who you are, pard, I doesn't know, for like me you are sailing under false colors; but you are onto me, I see, worse nor a wolf, and I'll just tell yer ther truth."

"Then out with it."

"I am a poor wretch in hard luck, and one

day I came across a man who had been wounded by the Indians and escaped.

"I did all I could for him, and yet could not save him, and when he was dying he told me as how his name were Pilot Paul, and he were sent by Texas Jack to Waco to guide a train westward."

"I concluded, as it would pay well, to take the job in his place, so I tore off half the sheet of Texas Jack's letter and wrote one recommending myself, as Mexican Moses, for the boys calls me that."

"I was playing it for all it was worth, when I met some old pards in this timber, and I tells you the outlaws wasn't here then, only four of my friends, and that's the truth."

"Why did you slip off when I accused you of being an outlaw?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Because, pard, there was blood in your eye, and I was afeerd you would have the emigrants hang me."

"As I believe you ought to be; but Colonel Fontaine can believe your story or not, as he pleases; but I warn him to keep you under guard, yes, bound, and still make you guide him on the trail, while I'll promise him to hang you if you take him wrong or into a trap."

"Do you hear?"

"I hears, Pard Hide-your-face."

"All right; if you go wrong you won't be able to hide your face from me, so see to it."

"Good-evening."

And touching his sombrero politely the strange man turned on his heel and walked away.

Colonel Fontaine called to him, but he did not heed, and reaching his black steer he sprang into the saddle and rode away over the moonlit prairie, a few notes of his bugle causing the herd feeding at a distance to go after him at a run, and they all soon faded from sight in the distance.

CHAPTER XIX.

TRAITORS IN CAMP.

THE captain of the Red Revolver Rangers had perfect confidence in Mexican Moses, or, rather, as much confidence in him as he ever placed in any man.

He had gained information which he had seemed to be much pleased with through the capture of Pilot Paul, and hence had sent Mexican Moses to carry out a plan he had in view.

It was a plan of devilry as a matter of course, and he had arranged the trail on which the guide was to lead the train, and just where he would find men to report all to him, the chief.

Thus informed through the men whom Mexican Moses had secretly met along the trail, Don Diaz was ready for his red work at the timber where he expected to ambush the emigrants.

He had formed a plot which he had expected to carry out without a hitch.

This plot was to ambush the train, sweep down upon them and carry off Adèle Fontaine and her father as prisoners, robbing the emigrants and killing only those who barred their way.

In spite of his coming to Texas, claiming to have lost his fortune, as his letter to Texas Jack had stated, Don Diaz believed that Colonel Fontaine had another motive and was in reality a rich man; but that motive will be known further along.

With Adèle a prisoner the chief felt that he could gain a large ransom and make terms with the colonel, yes, and the daughter, too, for the plot of the outlaw was a deep one.

So it was he had set his traps, and, knowing the force of the train from the reports of Mexican Moses, he had taken men enough, as he believed, to accomplish his purpose.

But the timber where he lay in hiding was not very thick, and the keen eyes of Bessie Langley had discovered men and horses in hiding there.

There the train had halted, and Mexican Moses had been sent at once to see what was the matter.

When it had gone into corral, as though against attack, the chief knew that his presence there in the timber, by some means, had become known, and there was but one thing for him to do.

That was to at once charge down upon the train in the open prairie.

Quickly his orders were given, and the Red Revolver Rangers dashed out, led by their daring chief, who, for some reason of his own, had completely masked himself, so as not to be known.

But suddenly the Demon Herd had appeared in sight over the rise of the prairie back on the trail the train had come, and Don Diaz wondered much, yet held no fear, with his horsemen, of the charge of the Wild Steers.

He had known the Masked Steer Rider as a secret and untiring foe to his band, but then he had been mounted on horseback and alone.

He had known the Mad Hermit and his Demon Herd, as another relentless foe of the Red Revolver Rangers, but both of these men had been reported dead by Antonio and Lopez, two of his best men.

In spite of their saying that they had shot the Masked Rider and also the Mad Hermit, here now appeared, as his field-glass plainly showed him, the Unknown horseman, mounted upon the

old Hermit's black steer, and charging down upon the train.

But did he intend to rush down upon the cattle, or was he really going to protect it from him, was the question that bothered the chief.

Mexican Moses had sent no word of having seen the Demon Rider on the trail, and altogether the chief could not understand it.

But he was not left long in doubt, as the Demon Rider, coming on like a thunderbolt, swerved to the right away from the train, and then scouted around in a way that showed he could have but one purpose in view.

Still the chief regarded it as madness upon the part of the Masked Rider.

He could not hope to run his cattle over horsemen.

But the Demon Herd came on at a mad pace, and a bugle-note from the Masked Rider set them to bellowing fearfully.

Then the chief saw that he must check their advance, and he gave the order to open fire and to bring down "the man on the black steer."

But the herd heeded not the fire, though several went down, the horses grew wild and halted, then became frantic, and the men, either unable, or unwilling to lead them, let them go.

The bold chief thought to flank the herd and still reach the train; but in vain, and he was forced to fly, and away, pell-mell went the invincible Red Revolver Rangers, put to flight by a herd of wild cattle, yet a herd with a leader.

The chief sought to make a stand in the timber, but the cattle gained rapidly, and there was no checking them, so he was forced to cross the stream and seek safety in the hills beyond.

And it was then long before he could bring his own frightened horse to a halt, but he at last did so, white with rage, and mentally vowing that the end was not yet, that he would carry out his plot and then seek a fearful revenge upon the Masked Steer Rider if it took his whole band to hunt him down.

As he halted his panting, foam-covered horse in the shelter of some timber, two of his men rode up and joined him.

All the others had gone on, seemingly making for the rendezvous he had appointed in case of defeat, for the chief prepared for emergencies, some miles away.

As the two men rode up he called out to them: "Go on after those infernal cowards and bring them back here, for I shall attack the train to-night if that Demon Rider is there or not."

As he spoke the two men rode up and one paused on either side of him, and quick as a flash came their revolvers to a level with his face and one commanded sternly:

"Hands up, Don, or die!"

CHAPTER XX.

SHEEP IN WOLVES' SKIN.

DON DIAZ, the chief of the Red Revolver Rangers, made it a subject of congratulation to himself that he was never caught off his guard.

He suspected everybody and everything, and even placed no confidence in the splendid horse he rode beyond a certain point.

His revolvers he trusted, from each day reloading them and keeping them in perfect condition.

But he had perfect confidence in himself, and he had never been in a situation of peril which he had not escaped from, or mastered in his own way.

But, suddenly, to find himself under the muzzles of the revolvers of two of his best men, and to hear the ominous words to hold up his hands or die, did take him for once aback.

The men had been with him only a few months, but they had proven the best of the band.

He had not the slightest doubt of them, as far as their treachery toward himself was concerned.

But there they sat on their horses, each with a hand upon his bridle-rein, and their other hands holding a revolver, the muzzles of which looked squarely into his eyes.

The men were not excited, nor nervous either at the result of their plan, whatever it was.

They were there for a purpose, and that purpose they meant to carry out fully.

This their determined faces showed.

They were known as Chestnut Charlie and Trapper Tim, and they professed to have lived honest lives until they thought to make money quickly by killing and robbing a New Mexican miner bound home with his fortune in dust.

They had been caught, and barely escaped the gallows, by getting away the night before their day of execution, though they killed their keeper in doing so.

This is the story with which they had come to join the Red Revolver Rangers, and they were at once made "members in good standing" of that band of cut-throats.

And it was Chestnut Charlie and Trapper Tim who now faced their chief and invited him to elevate his hands above his head, or prepare to pass in his checks.

He preferred the former, so up went his hands with a promptness which they had not expected of him.

"What does this mean?" thundered the chief,

with eyes flashing through the holes in his mask which he had not yet removed.

"Easy, pard, for there is no need o' shoutin'."

"Tim, jist take his claws and teeth off o' him so he can't bite, and then we kin go horseback riding together, and have a leetle chat as we ride along."

Trapper Tim obeyed, relieving the chief of his belt of arms and his holster revolvers, while with much caution he felt about him for any other pistol he might have out of sight.

He was wise in doing so, for two derringers were in his pockets very easy to get hold of if needed in a hurry.

To the indignation and surprise of the chief, Chestnut Charlie, still keeping one hand upon his revolver and that leveled at the chief, with the other drew from his pockets a pair of iron handcuffs, and said:

"Tim, jist snap these onto ther cap'n's wrists, for ropes and lariats is so easy stretched, whar these hain't."

"Curse you! do you intend to iron me?"

"For sure, cap'n, for it are safer."

"That's it, Tim," said Chestnut Charlie, as his companion snapped the irons upon the Don's wrists and then made his feet fast beneath his horse.

"Now, cap'n, we rides together."

"Where?"

"Waal, we'll tell yer as we goes along—Lordy!"

This latter exclamation was caused by the appearing in sight of one of the outlaw band.

"I thought they was all gone on," said Tim.

"Yas, so thoughted I, pard; but, cap'n, jist hail Dick Sloan yonder, and tell him to ride on to ther retreat quick, and tell ther boys ter wait your coming."

"I will not."

"Cap'n, we kin git away with Dick, and we means biz, so do as I says or you dies!"

With a curse the chief glanced into the face of Chestnut Charlie, and he saw certain death to him in the look, unless he obeyed; but it was a chance for him, as Dick Sloan was a desperate fellow, so he said:

"I refuse."

"I'll tell Dick ther cap'n says so, Charlie, and ef he shouts, jist let him have it and I'll drop Sloan," and Trapper Tim wheeled his horse and rode toward Dick Sloan, who was coming toward them and not a hundred yards away.

It was a critical moment for the two bold captors of the chief, and they knew it fully.

There might be others also, and if the chief called for aid, then the situation would be most critical, and their plot, whatever it was, frustrated.

"Pard, ef yer breathes aloud, you is deader than if a Injun hed kilt and scalped yer," said Chestnut Charlie in a suppressed tone, and he held his revolver in a way to cover the chief, though not so as to be seen by Dick Sloan.

"You will repent this work, my man, you and your pard," hissed the chief, but he knew better than to call out for help, or attract Dick Sloan's attention to his situation.

Dead, all would end; but alive, no matter how matters were against him there was hope, and so he remained quiet, while Trapper Tim rode on and halted Dick Sloan.

"Dick, ther cap'n says as how you is to ride to ther retreat at once, and tell the boys to wait his coming there; it takes a week for him to git thar."

"All right, pard, but I wants ter ask him if I is to arrest Antonio and Lopez, as he called out to me?"

"Waal, he are in a warm mood, and you'd better keep clear o' him, for he are givin' me and Charlie fits, and fer nothin'."

"You is right, so I'll git," and Dick Sloan suited his actions to his word, anxious to give the chief a wide berth if he was in what the band were wont to call his "red devils," a term applied to his bad humor.

Then Tim rode back to where Chestnut Charlie and his prisoner awaited him, and as they moved off in a southerly direction the latter said:

"Cap'n, you might as well know who we is now, and that we are sheep in wolves' skins, for me and Tim belongs to Texas Jack's band o' Cowboy Rangers, we does."

CHAPTER XXI.

COWBOY HONOR.

"By Heaven! I half-suspected it!"

So said the chief of the Red Revolver Rangers, when Chestnut Charlie made known to him the startling intelligence that he and Trapper Tim were not outlaws, but Texas Jack's Terrors, sheep in wolves' skins, as it were.

Both the men laughed at the words of the Don, and Chestnut Charlie said:

"Yas, pard, we is Texas Jack's Cowboy Rangers, and which folks calls Texas Jack's Terrors."

"Me and Tim are honest clean through, though we looks rough and like cut-throats, maybe."

"Yer see, me and Tim got ter considerin' one day how we c'd rope you in, and so says I:

"Tim, let's jine ther Red Revolvers."

"Waal, Tim was willing as I was, and so we went inter ther town, whar my brother-in-law

are jailer—yer see, he married my sister Sallie, cap'n—and so I says ter him, jist fix us up a leetle game ter look like regular out-an'-outers."

"So we agreed ther we was bad men from 'wayback, ther we hed robbed and kilt a miner, and when caught jist got rescued only too quick ter git hanged, and then kilt ther jailer and sought life everlastin' among ther Red Rangers."

"My brother-in-law, ther feller as married my sister Sal, and our jailer, he jist got some lies printed, and we pretended we tuk 'em from ther papers and read 'em to ther boys, about what bad men we was."

"Why, Lordy, cap'n, you swallowed ther medicine we give yer without making a face at it, and it left no bitter taste in your mouth."

"So we tells Texas Jack our leetle scheme, and he were only sorry he c'dn't work ther racket hisself; but are thet well knowed, it wouldn't have gone down about him, yer see."

"So we comes ter jine yer, and we makes believe pretty well, fer ther money we brought in, and said we hed struck it rich by murderin' a traveler, are counterfeit and ag'in' ther law ter pass."

"We hain't kilt nobody since we has been with yer, but we has lied awtul to yer about hev'n' did so."

"Now you see we wanted ter git you, and it were not easy ter do; but ter-day we concluded we'd do ther grand capter act, and here you is, and our destination are ther ranch o' Texas Jack, and it mout be thet you'll continue on to Kingdom Come."

"And, Pard Cap'n, maybe it would please yer ter know ther afore we left ther camp we jist fixed Prairie Pilot so as he could skip out in ther night, for we loosened up his ropes and told him whar he'd find his weepens and a horse, so he are now, I guesses, pretty nigh to Jack's ranch hisself, so you sees we has done ther best we could in a honest way, though we has lied ter play dishonest."

"Does yer foller me, Pard Cap'n?"

"Oh yes, perfectly, and I admire you for a brace of clever rascals," was the sneering reply, and the chief added:

"Oh yes, go on with your very interesting story, for I follow you."

"Yas, and you is likely ter do so until we gits to one end of a rope and you to t'other."

"If we didn't know ther thar won't be no danger now to ther train, bein' as your men won't move without you, we'd go by and tell 'em what have happened to the Don; but I guesses as our game-bag are full we'll hurry on to ther ranch, fer yer is one I prefers not ter be ridin' round with through ther country, and I guesses that Demon Steer Rider will look to ther comfort o' ther emigrants. Lordy, Pard Cap'n, did yer ever in all your livin' see a feller like thet one who rid thet black steer?"

"Do you know aught about him?"

"Nary."

"I do not believe you."

"Waal, we doesn't care ef yer don't."

"I believe it is Texas Jack hisself."

"Yer is away off, and yet it might be him, fer durned ef we knows who he are."

"He wears a mask, and since we left ther ranch he hev come inter notoriety, so he might be Jack arter all."

"I believe that it is Texas Jack."

"Waal, thar hain't no law ag'in' yer believin' what yer likes; but thet man are taller than Texas Jack, and I hain't heerd o' our cap'n takin' ter ridin' steers, though thar hain't a buckin' horse on ther prairie ther he can't ride."

"Well, if it is not Texas Jack, who is it?"

"I gives up guessin', cap'n."

"Well, whoever he is, he is a remarkable man, and I supposed he was dead."

"Yas, Antonio and Lopez said so."

"And also that the Mad Hermit was dead, Pard Cap'n."

"Yas, and when I return to camp, they shall rue their lying to me."

"Will yer punish 'em, cap'n?"

"Yas."

"Kill them."

"It will be a sad day for them, when I return."

"They hain't in no danger, cap'n."

"Why not?"

"Yer won't git back," was the very ominous response, and it brought back the chief to a realization that he was a prisoner, and he relapsed into silence, while his captors did the same.

After several miles had been ridden over without a word being spoken, and the moon had risen, flooding the prairie with silvery light, the chief seemed to have suddenly come to a conclusion, which he had decided upon as they rode along, for he said in a deliberate way:

"Chestnut Charlie, do you and Trapper Tim know the sum that is offered for my head?"

"Yas, cap'n, thar is more than one price on your head."

"What are they?"

"Waal, first ther gov'ner offers five thousand fer yer, dead or alive, and we has yer alive, with ther chance o' carryin' yer in dead, ef yer gives us trouble, which yer is likely ter do."

"Then ther town o' San Antonio hev concluded to pay two thousand to ther ones who

fetches yer in alive, and only five hundred if you is dead—yer see the folks thar is anxious ter meet yer alive.

"Thirdly, as Parson Doolittle ust ter say in his sarmons when I war a kid, only he run 'em up ter twenty thirdly, he did; but as I were a-saying, thirdly, ther ranchmen o' ther lower trails hev said they would each give ten head o' cattle fer your scalp, and as thar is a few dozen o' 'em, yer see a man c'd git a lot o' hoofs ter set him up in biz.

"Then Texas Jack hev said he would give ther finest American horse, and Mexican saddle, bridle and spurs as could be bought in Mexico, to ther man o' his lay-out who fetched you in dead or a-livin', cap'n.

"Oh, you is valuable, an' no mistake, cap'n, and it do strike me an' Tim thet we is a-goin' ter win ther game with you fer ther trump keerd, cap'n."

The Red Revolver Ranger had listened patiently to Chestnut Charlie's enunciation of the rewards hanging over his head, and then said:

"Well, the governor's, the citizens of San Antonio, the cattle-men, and Texas Jack's offers will all foot up say about eight thousand dollars."

"I guess so, cap'n."

"And I will give you a clean ten thousand in gold if you will set me free."

"Thar is one thing ag'in' our acceptin' your generous offer, cap'n."

"What is that?"

"I speaks for Tim as well as myself."

"Well, you are afraid it will be known that you sold out?"

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"We has honor," was the resolute response of Chestnut Charlie, and it was said in a tone that destroyed every hope of the Don's gaining his freedom by bribery.

CHAPTER XXII.

TRAPPER TIM'S FATE.

WHEN the man whom Texas Jack had claimed to recognize as Ethan Fontaine rode away from the scouts' ranch, he was in far better trim than when he had been taken there by the Cowboy Rangers.

He was well mounted, and the scout had given him an outfit of the best of arms, a rifle and revolvers.

Then he had supplied him a serape or two, provisions, and, in fact, all he needed for a journey on the prairie.

Whatever Texas Jack had thought of the man, for the sake of his father and sister he had not expressed himself.

He had not even told the man that he had sent Prairie Pilot to guide Colonel Fontaine to his ranch in Texas, and where he was to make his home.

And so the scout saw his guest, whose life he had saved, depart on his way, as he believed, to Mexico.

Whatever the man led Texas Jack to believe as to his purpose, after leaving the ranch he did not take the trail that would lead him to the Rio Grande, when he could cross the river and feel free from peril, at least from pursuit.

Instead he held on to a trail to the northward and did not urge his horse out of a walk, as a man whose life was in danger would do.

He seemed so little in a hurry that he halted often, and it would seem that he was almost undecided as to what course to pursue, or he was waiting and watching for some one.

Thus two days passed, and he had not gone fifty miles from the ranch of the captain of the Cowboy Rangers.

He had halted early at night, and never broke camp until the sun was far above the horizon in the morning.

One day he halted for his dinner, and, staking his horse out to feed, had cooked his meal and then lay down to take it easy.

He was aroused by a distant shot, and, springing to his feet, glanced out over the prairie, for he had camped in a thick growth of timber on a rise.

He saw coming up a prairie valley three men.

Two rode by the side of each other, and the third was just placing behind his saddle a deer which he had killed.

They were coming toward the timber, and as there was a fine spring there they doubtless knew of it and that it was a good camping-place.

The Fugitive Ranchero was in a quandary as to what to do.

He might find in the three horsemen deadly foes, and he might find that they were friends.

Perhaps they were Texas Jack's Terrors, and maybe they were Red Revolver Rangers.

If the former, he had little to fear; but if the latter, then they were men to avoid if he wished not to be robbed, perhaps killed.

So he watched them closely, and soon saw that the man in the center, for the other horseman had now overtaken the others, was a prisoner.

And more, he started as he recognized him, and said:

"As I live, it is Don Diaz, for he is a man to remember when once seen."

"And the others?"

"Why, they can but be Texas Jack's Terrors, and they have captured a man it was said would never be taken alive."

"No, they, too, have the red belt and revolvers, so what can it mean?"

"Hah! I have it! they are traitors, and have been tempted by the reward to take their chief prisoner."

"I will save them the trouble, and pocket the reward myself."

"But I forget, for I could never claim the reward; but I will rescue Don Diaz, so here goes to take the chances."

He moved to a better position as he spoke, raised his rifle and stood ready for the three horsemen to approach near, for they were yet a hundred yards distant, having halted to gaze into the timber.

But, as though apparently satisfied, they came on, and the man in ambush waited until they were not a hundred feet away, for he must make no mistake.

His finger was on the trigger, his eye glancing along the sight, and the muzzle of his rifle covered the heart of Trapper Tim.

Then came the sharp crack of the rifle, and Trapper Tim threw his hands upward and fell from his horse.

Again the rifle cracked, and this time Chestnut Charlie's horse saved his life, for the bullet entered the brain of the animal.

In an instant Chestnut Charlie was on his feet, and throwing himself upon the horse of his dead comrade, spurred forward to grasp the rein of the chief's steed and lead him away in flight.

But Don Diaz saw his chance, and urged his horse forward and dashed directly for the timber. Chestnut Charlie drew his revolver and opened fire, while he seemed about to ride after his prisoner, when the rifle from ambush again opened, and he turned and rode away at full speed, a bullet wound in his arm, and the leaden messengers following him thick and fast.

In irony as he was, the chief could do but little, and he suddenly found his horse checked by a hand upon his rein, while a voice said:

"Well, Don Diaz, your luck has not deserted you, for I have saved you from the hangman."

"Ah! I have met you before, but where?" and the chief gazed into the face of the man before him.

"We once played cards for a night together, and you won my last dollar; but when I afterward learned that Don Diaz Perdido was my opponent I was not surprised."

"Like you, sir, I am a fugitive from justice, and with a fellow-feeling for you, I concluded to save you from your captors."

"And you did so, thus placing me under the debt of my life to you, though I am sorry you did not get that second man."

"Let him go, for he must be a bold man to have captured the chief of the Red Revolver Rangers, and I admire a plucky fellow."

"He is one; but I recall you now—you are the Fugitive Ranchero, Ethan Fontaine?"

"I am."

"And which way bound?"

"To save my neck from the noose."

"Well, join my band, for there will be a vacancy among my officers when I return, and you shall have the place."

"I thank you, and I will join you, for that was my intention, rather than go to Mexico."

"If my wrists were free I would shake your hand on the compact."

"Which one of these men had the key to your irons?"

"The one lying yonder, and then we had best not tarry here, as the locality is too near Texas Jack and his Terrors for the good health of the Red Revolver Rangers."

Ethan Fontaine took the hint, and going to the dead body of Trapper Tim took from his pocket the key of the manacles, and soon set the chief free, also unbinding the thongs about his ankles.

"Now, sir, I will grasp your hand on our compact, and again I thank you for my life, for once in the clutches of Texas Jack my career would have quickly ended."

"Now let me suggest that you take the Red Revolvers from that man, for you have worn them, and you must discard your rifle, when we reach the band, for my Rangers must depend wholly upon small weapons."

"Come, sir, shall we be off?"

"And not bury this body?"

"Oh, no, let the wolves feast upon him," was the heartless reply, and mounting soon after, the two men rode away together on the back trail, leaving poor Trapper Tim to the coyotes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LOST.

As the reader already knows, from what has taken place among the Red Revolver Rangers, there was no attack on the camp of Colonel Fontaine and his party on the night following the rush of the Wild Steers, which put to flight the outlaw band.

When the Wild Steer Rider left the camp, he

had told Colonel Fontaine to still use the man, Mexican Moses, as his guide, though to keep him a prisoner at the same time.

He had also hinted very strongly to the guide that he did not believe his story, of having found Prairie Paul dying, and that if the emigrant train was guided wrong, he would suffer for it.

The night passed quietly enough, the prisoner having been placed under a special guard and kept securely bound, as the Unknown had left him.

With the peep of dawn the guard aroused the camp, the tents were struck, breakfast gotten ready, and the train pulled out of the timber soon after sunrise.

Mexican Moses was very silent, and he wore a look of injured innocence that was comical.

That he was a scamp no one doubted, else why his disguise?—but that he belonged to the band of Red Revolver Rangers, a few did doubt.

He was tied to his horse, and led to the front, where he resumed his duty as guide, and the train moved on as before.

But neither Adèle nor Bessie had any faith in him, and were anxious, discussing their fears to each other, though not before the others.

Colonel Fontaine had said:

"Guide, conduct us to the locality agreed, and you go free and get your pay; but show the slightest sign of treachery and you will end your career very suddenly."

"Pard Colonel, I was a goot mans, but you don't believe I was."

"I will do as you tells me, so you need not feels bad about it."

"See that you do," was the stern rejoinder, and the colonel rode back and joined his daughter and Bessie Langley.

In the afternoon Mexican Moses asked to have his feet freed of the bonds, that he might get down and walk, and his request was complied with by Mr. Langley, whom he had asked.

For a while he walked on, leading his horse, and then he stopped, as though to mount again; but his horse gave a sudden start, and, pulling away from him, went off at a run.

"Let him go, for he was not wurt' mooch," cried Mexican Moses, as one of the men started after him.

"No, he shall not go; come, Bessie, let us catch him," cried Adèle, and the two rode after the runaway animal.

"Come pack mit you, for there was red Injuns about v'at vill scalp you pretty quick!" yelled Mexican Moses, and hearing his words Colonel Fontaine and Mr. Langley also called to the two girls to return, that the old horse was not worth going after.

But Adèle waved her hand and the two rode on at full speed, while the guide's horse dashed ahead of them at a pace that they had no idea he could equal.

And more, he outran either of their horses, to their great chagrin.

"Bessie!"

"Yes, Miss Adèle."

"Please don't Miss me, but call me Adèle," impatiently said Adèle, to the surprise of Bessie, and then she quickly added:

"Last night I saw that guide writing something, and a while since he took a paper from his pocket and fastened it to his saddle."

"I was watching him closely; but before I could divine his motive, he started his horse off on a run, for the rein was fastened to the bridle so that it would not drag."

"We must catch him if in our power."

"Indeed we must, Adèle."

And Bessie let her whip fall upon her horse as though to emphasize her words.

On, on the two horses bounded, side by side for awhile, and then Adèle's animal began to show the better speed and endurance and drop Bessie's mare behind.

But the horse of the guide bore no weight other than his saddle and bridle and held his lead.

"Oh, Bessie, the train is out of sight," suddenly cried Adèle, as she glanced back over her shoulder.

It was true, and for a moment both girls were alarmed.

But Adèle seemed to be gaining on the guide's horse and she did not draw rein, while some distance behind Bessie came on at a rapid pace.

Then came the cry from Adèle:

"See! he is leaving us!"

"We must give it up and return."

"Yes, Adèle," shouted Bessie, and her voice was barely audible.

Then Adèle sought to check her horse, to return; but, to her horror, she discovered that the animal, maddened by the lash she had laid upon him and to which he was unaccustomed, was running away with her.

In vain did she call to him to stop and then coax, while she pulled on the reins with all her might, for she could not check him, and, worse still, he was not following the guide's horse, which was leaving away to the right.

In despair Adèle looked back to find Bessie still following her, but out of reach of her voice.

The sun was nearing the horizon, and night was not far away.

The train must be all of six miles distant, and the bewildered girl hardly knew in which direction it lay, for they had not come in a straight direction in the chase, as the guide's horse had several times turned.

At last a fringe of timber was seen not far ahead, and toward it the horse headed.

Far behind came Bessie, and, utterly worn out, Adèle let her horse have his way.

On to the timber he ran and came to a halt at a stream.

Then she threw herself from her saddle, hitched the panting, foam-covered steel, and turned to look for Bessie.

She was nearly a mile away, but still following her, for, though she could see the train when Adèle lost sight of it, she would not desert her friend.

Just as the sun went down beneath the prairie horizon Bessie came up.

Her face was pale, but she said, pluckily:

"What an adventure; and we did not catch the old horse."

"No; and lost ourselves in the bargain, for my horse ran away with me."

"Bessie, we are lost, and it is my fault."

"Never mind; we'll be found soon, for the train will halt and all turn out to look for us."

"You dear, brave girl; but, can they find us?"

"I shall always hope they can, until I am sure they cannot; but let us start back, Adèle, and try and find the train."

"It is moonlight, you know."

"Yes."

And a few minutes after Adèle mounted and the two girls, alone on the prairie, started to find their way back to the train.

But it was no easy task, and the moon did not rise until it had been half an hour dark, and then they were not sure whether they were going right or wrong; but they were going wrong.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OUTLAW'S PRISONER.

THE Red Revolver Rangers had, about the time the Fontaine train was toiling westward, established a temporary retreat some forty miles from the Rio Grande, across which they could retire if hard pressed by the soldiers or Texas Jack's Rangers.

Their chief had been in the same camp before, and he knew that it was a safe place to fight in or retreat from, while he could the more readily get his booty from there into Mexico.

Knowing that the soldiers would be busy with the Indians, who at that season were most troublesome, that the settlers would be hard at work with their crops and the cattlemen looking after their herds, Don Diaz knew that he would be safer in his raids than at any other time during the year, and so he had moved into Texas to carry the war of robbery and murder there.

Trains were coming West too in numbers, and many of them were rich in plunder, while Government trains, if poorly guarded, would prove a rich haul.

So it was that Don Diaz went to one of his old haunts, and it was there that Prairie Pilot had been taken when captured by the Red Revolver Rangers.

This man, who had been sent by Texas Jack to guide the Fontaine train westward and had been captured by the Red Revolver Rangers, was held a prisoner at the rendezvous referred to.

He expected nothing more than death, for why should he be shown mercy by Don Diaz, whom he would show no mercy to if taken?

He was put in irons, and kept under guard as well, but why he was not at once slain he could not comprehend.

One night Chestnut Charlie was his guard, and the latter said in a low tone to him:

"Pard, yer don't seem glad ter see me and Tim."

"I confess that I am not, for you are an accursed traitor to our Cowboy Ranger Band," was the stern reply of Prairie Pilot.

At this Chestnut Charlie laughed, and then replied:

"I'm glad yer think so, Pilot, fer I wouldn't hev these t'other fellers not think so too; but," and he lowered his voice to a whisper, "me and Tim hain't so wicked as we looks."

"What do you mean, Chestnut Charlie?"

"We come here six months ago."

"I know that."

"For reasons."

"To rob and murder your friends."

Again Chestnut Charlie laughed and then continued:

"You is away off, Pard Pilot, for we is heere or a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"Ter git acquainted with the gang, their re-treants and trails, so as ter be able ter interdooce 'em inter society when we is ready."

"Charlie?"

"Yes."

"If I could only believe you."

"Waal, I'll prove it, for to-morrow night the Don starts on a raid, and me and Tim goes with

him; but afore we goes I'll slip in and loosen up your ropes so you kin git yer hands through 'em, and then untie your feet."

"Has yer noticed a big tree as is lightnin' struck, over yonder on ther hill?"

"Yes, I see it every day."

"Waal, when yer gets out o' this, make yer way to the tree, and yer'll find weepens there, some provender fer yer internals, and a horse."

"Then I guesses yer knows ther kentry well enough ter make yer way back to Cap'n Jack's ranch."

"But don't yer tell any o' ther boys we is squar' at heart, me and Tim, or it might git out, and we don't know jist when we kin strike a blow; but we lives in hopes o' doin' so soon."

"Tell ther cap'n, however, we got you foot-loose, for he knows our leetle racket."

"Chestnut Charlie, forgive me for doubting you?"

"Lordy, pard, we is jedged by ther comp'ny we keeps, though allers it hain't a good rule, fer I knowed a wife who was good as a angil to still live with her husband who were a perfect devil," and as one of the hand came near, Chestnut Charlie turned away, leaving Prairie Pilot plenty of food for thought.

At length he turned again and said:

"Pilot, I hain't exactly sart'in, but I thinks you was going to guide a train west?"

"Yes."

"Letter from Texas Jack, hadn't yer?"

"Yes."

"Waal, it are my private opinion ther Don wrote that letter ter suit himself, and sent it by ther biggest devil in this whole outfit, Mexican Moses."

"You mean, Chestnut Charlie, that he sent Mexican Moses to guide the train in my stead?" asked Prairie Pilot, excitedly.

"Yas."

"Oh! why did you not help me sooner?"

"Cause we couldn't, and this are ther fu'st time I has been yer guard in ther weeks yer has been here."

"And the outlaw captain goes on a raid to-morrow night, you say?"

"He does."

"I'll wager it is to meet this very train."

"Charlie, you must prevent this if in your power, you and Tim, for there are women in the train."

"We'll do all we kin, Pilot, but me and Tim has ter go mighty keerful."

"I can understand that; but if you give me a good horse, and I get free to-morrow night, I may be able to head the train off."

"That was me and Tim's idee, that you could warn 'em, catch Mexican Moses and hang him."

"I'll do it; but can you not let me go to-night?"

"It is onpossible, pard, fer when you makes yer escape, I wants Tim and me ter be away from camp, fer reasons I guesses yer kin understand."

"I do, and I will have ample time to head the train off, if I ride hard, and I guess I know which trail Mexican Moses come by."

"Yes, you kin do it, but yer must keep a eye open fer Tim and me in ther attack, and don't shoot us ef yer kin help it; but ef we sh'd go under, yer knows we were honest at heart and meant well, though we didn't quite git to ther pinnacle o' our hopes and rope in ther outlaw lay-out."

And again Chestnut Charlie turned away, for he did not wish to be seen talking with the prisoner.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SCRAP OF PAPER.

AS Chestnut Charlie had promised, he came the next night to the spot where Prairie Pilot was a prisoner, and said to the guard:

"Bruiser, ther Don says he has orders fer yer afore he leaves, so I takes yer place here o' this durned pilgrim until yer sees him."

The guard left, and in a minute of time Chestnut Charlie had loosened the bonds on the wrists of Prairie Pilot, and placed near him a belt of arms, his own weapons in fact.

"Ther horse is yonder by ther tree I told yer of, pard."

"Yes, I observed it particularly to-day."

"Yer simply has ter git ther guard near yer, on some excuse, and let him hev it hard on ther cocannut."

"Then go down ther hill thar to ther canyon, and you'll find ther tree, and ther horse hain't far away, fer Trapper Tim hev gone ter take him thar now, and he has your own outfit on him."

"Thank you, Pard Charlie."

"Lordy, don't thank me, fer it tickles me mightily ter do it fer yer."

"Yonder comes ther guard back, so I must git, as ther chief lights out in half an hour."

Bruiser just then returned, and Chestnut Charlie asked:

"Is yer goin' along with us, Bruiser?"

"Nary; I only wishes I was, fer ther Don puts ther prisoner under my charge in pertic'lar, an' says he'll hang me if he gits away."

"That are hard," and Chestnut Charlie departed, and soon after the prisoner saw the

chief and some two dozen men ride out of camp.

He waited until the rest of camp was buried in sleep, and then he said:

"Pard, ef yer'll loosen up a little on my ankle ropes, I can go to sleep; but they hurt as they are."

"Cuss yer, I wants 'em ter hurt, and I'll tighten 'em ther more, instead o' loosen 'em," was the savage reply.

"No, I beg of you not to do that," urged Prairie Pilot.

"But I will, fer I won't be hanged on your account, ef I knows why," and the brute stooped over to carry out his threat and tighten the bonds, when there came a dull thud and without a groan he sunk down before the prisoner.

The revolver in Prairie Pilot's hand had fallen heavily, and the chances were that Bruiser would never be hanged.

Rising to his feet the freed man shook himself as though enjoying his freedom, and then he took the guard's weapons, rolled up his *serape* and slipped down the hillside into the canyon, leaving the camp in slumber.

He had noted well the locality of the lightning-blasted tree, and found it without difficulty, and, after a short search, discovered a horse hitched near.

The nose of the horse was muzzled, to prevent his neighing and betraying his presence, and he was saddled and bridled, and the rifle and traps of the guide hung upon the saddle-horn with his lariat.

The animal appeared also to be a good one.

Mounting with an effort, for he was very stiff after his long captivity, Prairie Pilot made his way along the ridge, and thence through the foot-hills to the prairie.

He got his bearings then and set off on a trail his perfect knowledge of which told him would head off the train, if it had been led by Mexican Moses, as he supposed it would be.

Then he pressed forward rapidly, not sparing his horse, for he wished to flank Don Diaz and his raiding-party, and thus warn Colonel Fontaine of his danger and that the guide he was blindly following intended treachery.

It was dawn before Prairie Pilot halted to rest his tired horse, and he knew that he had come a long distance.

His horse was very tired, and he felt that he must give him at least two hours' rest.

Unheeding himself, he bathed the limbs of the animal, then gave him a good rubbing down and staked him out to feed, while he prepared breakfast for himself.

After a long rest he mounted once more, and to his deep regret saw that his horse went lame.

He urged him on, however, but the lameness increased, and after a few miles he was forced to halt again.

In vain was it then that he tried to get the horse to continue on the trail.

The animal was dead bent and went on three legs.

"Poor fellow! you did all you could for me," Prairie Pilot said, kindly patting the animal, and then taking off the saddle and bridle he shouldered them, and with a good-by to the horse walked on.

The animal neighed and tried to hobble after him, as though fearing he was being deserted.

But it was no use, and he was forced to give it up; but the ranger had halted him in a valley where water and grass were plentiful, so that he need not suffer.

Sore and stiff himself, he walked but slowly, and after a couple of hours was compelled to halt.

Night came on, and he had made but a few miles from where he had left his horse, but he went into camp, hoping the rest would help him greatly.

In the morning he started again bright and early.

But for weeks he had been tied hand and foot, poorly fed and had suffered greatly, and, strong as he was, he knew he was unequal to the task he had set for himself.

But still he hobbled on, and, resting frequently, felt that he was at least making some progress.

The thought that the outlaw chief and his men were ahead of him and must be at their red work almost maddened him.

Then came the hope that the train would be several days late, and he might yet cross its trail and warn them of danger while Don Diaz was lying in wait for his victims.

So he held to the left, where he supposed Don Diaz would be, and thus another day and night passed.

It was at dawn of the third morning after his escape that he arose, lame and weary, and sought to press on.

He had camped on the side of a canyon in a thicket, and suddenly he started, for he beheld a riderless horse coming toward him at a swinging walk.

Instantly he made the saddle end of his lariat fast to a tree, and a minute after he had thrown the noose.

The startled horse sought to bound away, but the lariat went taut with a vicious twang and the animal was thrown to the ground.

Forgetting his lameness, the guide ran down the side of the canyon and the horse was his captive; and he was saddled and bridled, too, though neither was of much value.

Then the eyes of the guide fell upon a scrap of paper fastened about the horn.

Instantly he detached it and read:

"After the herd stampeded you, I was discovered by the Masked Steer Rider, and sought to escape, but his black steer overhauled my horse, and he caught me with his larint.

"He took me back to the train and told them to keep me bound, but forced me to guide them, and I am doing so; but fluding a chance, send you this line by my messenger horse to say I will guide train to the Black Canyon, where you can be to."

"MEXICAN MOSES."

"Aha!"

And Prairie Pilot gave a long whistle.

"This scrap of paper tells a tale; and you are a messenger horse, are you?"

"Well, I have heard that the Red Revolver Rangers had half a dozen messenger animals, and you look like a good one, too."

"Well, I'll just change your saddle and bridle for mine, and then we'll go on a trail, good horse."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DESPERATE CHASE.

It was a long, dreary, fearful night to the two maidens who were lost upon the prairie.

The moon rose soon after darkness fell, and they thought they knew their way to the train.

But miles were gone over and no lights appeared in sight to direct them, no camp-fire became visible.

The moon rose higher into the heavens, and they knew that it was approaching the hour of midnight.

Their horses bowed their heads and now and then stumbled with fatigue.

At last a dark object broke the outline of the prairie horizon, and as they drew nearer they were aware that it was a timber motte.

They hastened toward it, for their horses needed rest, in fact seemed unable to go further, and their fair riders were almost ready to fall from their saddles.

At last the timber was reached, and Bessie gave a cry of joy as she saw a fire.

They rode toward it, but it was a deserted camp-fire, a log still burning, but those who had been there had long since departed.

"It is a ray of hope at least," said Adèle, as she slipped from her saddle.

"Yes, and there is a stream of water, and here is grass in plenty."

"It is not so bad after all, Adèle," said Bessie, cheerily.

Adèle Fontaine thought that it was bad enough, but she said nothing.

All the horses of the train had their stake-ropes about their necks, the coil hung upon the saddle-horns, and so the maidens first watered the worn-out animals, then took off their saddles and bridles.

The horses were too tired to eat, and when staked out lay down at once.

There was at one side of the fire a wicky-up, evidently thrown up by the former occupant of the camp.

Under this brush shelter the girls placed their saddles and spread a saddle-blanket, using the other to cover with.

Both of them had a revolver in their saddle-holster, and were not afraid of wolves attacking them.

More wood was thrown on the fire, and as it blazed up, Bessie said solemnly:

"Adèle, I've got something to tell you."

"Well, Bessie?"

"When you called to me to come with you after the guide's horse, I was carrying a broiled bird and some bread to our wagon-driver, for he had eaten no dinner, as he had to shoe a horse."

"I jammed it into my saddle-pocket, so see here!"

"Oh, Bessie!"

"I knew I'd surprise you, and don't it come in well?"

"It does indeed, for in spite of our terrible situation I am as hungry as a bear."

"Ugh! don't speak of bears, Adèle, or you'll take my appetite away," said Bessie.

Adèle shuddered at the suggestive remark, and as Bessie drew out the lunch, they at once set to and ate it with more relish than they remembered to have eaten a meal before.

A gourd hung to Adèle's saddle got water for them, and then, rolling a longer log upon the fire, they lay down to sleep, for they were really used up, covering themselves with one of the saddle-blankets.

The other serving as a couch, and their saddles as pillows, they congratulated themselves upon their good fortune in spite of their perilous position.

The night faded away, the dawn came, and the neighing of Adèle's horse awoke them.

They started up in alarm, and were soon conscious of all that had happened.

The horses were near, feeding, and seemed rested by their six hours' halt, but both appeared nervous.

"Some one must be about, Adèle," said Bessie, and she added: "Let us eat the rest of our lunch and get away."

While Bessie went to the stream for water, Adèle led the horses up, and they were soon saddled and bridled.

Then they ate their scant breakfast and mounted.

And not a moment too soon, for a wild yell echoed through the timber, the clatter of hoofs followed, and a Comanche brave appeared in sight, just riding into the motte.

His yell was to call half a dozen comrades who were off on the prairie a couple of hundred yards and coming toward the timber.

They answered the cry, and came forward at a run.

With pallid faces, the girls turned their horses' heads toward the prairie and bounded away.

The animals were rested, yet not wholly so by any means, after their hard ride of the day before.

But they ran well, and the two maidens were rejoiced to see that the red-skins were not gaining upon them.

"If our horses were only fresh," sighed Adèle.

"Yes, but which way, Adèle?"

"Heaven knows, Bessie, for the prairie seems all alike, and we certainly are lost."

So on they went at full speed, and in silence.

There was nothing for them to say, but their thoughts were busy, their hearts were full of a fearful dread.

At last Bessie looked behind, for neither had seemed to have courage to do so for some time past.

There were five Indians, well-mounted, and strung out in a line extending a hundred yards, according to the speed of their respective horses.

They were in full war-paint, and the leading one, mounted on a white horse, wore the head-dress of a chief.

They were just out of range, and they seemed to know as much, for they threw no ammunition away by firing uselessly.

But they were gaining, and this Bessie saw.

"Our horses are doing their best, Adèle," she said, softly. "And the red-skins are gaining!"

"Yes."

"Well, we can but die," was the plucky response, and Adèle put her hand upon her pistol.

"Yes, we will die, too, when all hope is gone."

"Let us head for yonder line of timber, Adèle."

Bessie pointed as she spoke to a distant fringe of timber, evidently marking the course of a stream.

"Any way," said Adèle, recklessly, and they sped on.

Their horses showed more and more the pressure upon them, and urged as they were, it was a question if they held out to the timber, several miles away.

Nearer and nearer came the red-skins, silent and urging their horses on as though sure of their prey.

Nearer and nearer to the timber drew the straining horses of the two girls, and closer and closer to them crept the hard-urged ponies of the Indians.

"Alas! we can never make it, Bessie, for we are doomed."

Bessie's answer to Adèle's hopeless words was a glad cry.

"Oh, Adèle! see! see! yonder comes the Masked Rider!"

The words rung out almost wildly, and Adèle echoed them with:

"We are saved!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RETURN TO CAMP.

DON DIAZ was in no pleasant mood when he returned to his camp in the mountains.

He had met with a defeat in his attack upon the emigrant train, had been most cleverly captured by two of his men whom he certainly believed allied to his interests and found to be a couple of Texas Jack's Terrors, and they had, during their stay with him, learned all of his retreats and movements; there was one of them, Trapper Tim, dead it was true, but the other, Chestnut Charlie, had escaped, and was liable to bring trouble upon him.

Then there was Mexican Moses, whose fate he knew nothing of, so could not count on hearing from him, and, worse than all, the two Cowboy Rangers, in his name, had ordered all the men back to the retreat to await his coming.

Then, too, there was another thorn in his side, and that was that the Masked Unknown still lived, and worse still, he seemed to be allied to the Mad Hermit, who had been also known as the Wild Steer Rider.

These two men were both sworn foes of the Red Revolver Rangers, and the chief knew they were men to hunt him hard.

In all these troubles there was but one thing to soluce him, and that was his having been rescued from the hangman's rope by Ethan Fontaine.

He had also solace in the fact that there was revenge to take upon those upon whom his anger had fallen, and that revenge he meant to take to its full extent.

His pride had had a fall in being captured, and he would not let his men know that he had been so cleverly deceived and forced to surrender for anything.

So he said to Ethan Fontaine as they neared the retreat:

"I am going to ask you to do me a favor, Fontaine."

"Certainly, Don Diaz."

"I am going to tell the men that I owe my life to you, but not that I was captured by those two traitors, Chestnut Charlie and Trapper Tim."

"I shall tell the men that you will be my first officer, stepping into the shoes of Antonio."

"He is dead, then?"

"No; but he very soon will be, and you are to take his place."

"Thank you, chief."

"The debt is on my side, Fontaine, not yours."

"But, as Chestnut Charlie escaped—"

"Had I dreamed of the trouble he might give you, I would have been more anxious to have dropped him."

"But you did not, and you did your share as it was in saving me and killing the other; but, as he has escaped, we must change all our retreats, keep scouts out, and be constantly on guard."

"I will have you take the men back to a safe retreat, the men whom I do not need, and the others will go with me, for there is a train I wish to strike."

"I am under your orders, chief."

"Well, here we are at camp, and I am glad to see they are on the alert," said Don Diaz, as a horseman suddenly appeared in the trail before him.

"Well, Felix, what news in camp?" asked the chief as he rode up to the horseman.

"All quiet, sir, and awaiting your coming," responded the horseman, and then he added quickly:

"Pardon, chief, but there is news, for the prisoner escaped."

The chief wheeled toward him quickly and said:

"Do you mean the Prairie Pilot?"

"Yes, sir."

"By Heaven, but heads shall fall for this."

"When did he escape?"

"The night you left, sir."

"Who was his guard?"

"Bruiser, chief."

"Then his career ends."

"He's dying now, Señor Chief, for the prisoner broke his skull."

"Is Señor Antonio in camp?"

"Yes, chief."

"And Lopez?"

"Yes, señor."

"Come!"

With this word to Ethan Fontaine, and uttered in a voice hoarse with anger, the chief rode rapidly on and soon after dashed up to his quarters.

It was an Indian tepee, made of dressed skins, and ornamented with various designs artistically drawn, the work of the chief in his leisure hours.

The camp was on a ridge between two valleys, and on one side were the shelters of the men, canvas "flies," which served as a fair shelter in bad weather.

The men were scattered about, some forty in number, a wild, desperate-looking lot, and their saddles and equipments were near, while their horses were under a herder in the valley.

At sight of their chief, accompanied by a stranger, the men sprung to their feet and they seemed to know that there was trouble on hand, for his face was livid with anger.

"Officer Antonio, this way at once," he shouted in a voice of thunder, and that worthy appeared, his face paling as though he dreaded to face his chief.

"Well, Señor Chief, I am here," he said quietly.

"Order every man in camp, sick, well or wounded, to come before my tent at once, sir."

"Yes, señor, but I have to report that—"

"Did you hear my command, Señor Antonio?"

"I did, sir, but I was going to say—"

"Obey me then!" roared Don Diaz, and Antonio walked away, wondering what had put the chief in such a humor.

He was the same man who had been made the second in rank in the band, and that he had done naught to arouse the ire of Don Diaz he could not believe.

In a short while the men had all assembled before the chief's tepee, where Ethan Fontaine sat in a camp chair gazing with interest upon the strange scene, and the savage faces before him, while though his mind could not but curse the thought of how low he had fallen, he, Ethan Fontaine, born a gentleman, reared in luxury and refinement, had fallen so low as to have to herd with outlaws, yes, was an outlaw himself.

"All are not here, sir," sternly said the chief, as he glanced his eyes over them.

"All excepting the three guards, sir, Mexican Moses, who is with the train, and Chestnut Charlie and Trapper Tim," said Antonio.

"And Bruiser?"

"He is dying, señor, from a blow given him by the prisoner, Prairie Pilot, who escaped."

"I thought I left you in command here?"

"You did, señor," and Antonio paled under the look which Don Diaz cast upon him, it was so full of fury and evil.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEAD-SHOT EXECUTIONERS.

THAT the chief of the Red Revolver Rangers had returned, with mischief in his mind, those of his band who knew him best fully realized, and each one was in dread, not knowing where the lightning of his anger would strike.

He was feared by one and all, and yet they admitted his courage and skill as a commander, and well knew that it required just such a leader to hold a crowd of men, such as they were, together, and protect them.

In a few words Señor Antonio told of the escape of the prisoner Prairie Pilot. All that he could tell was that the guard who had gone to relieve Bruiser, had found him lying where the prisoner had been, his skull fractured, and Prairie Pilot had robbed him of his weapons and left.

"Any horses gone?"

"Yes, sir."

"What one?"

"Your bay horse, señor."

"Ah! one of my best horses."

"Well?"

"We trailed her from where she had been staked out, round to the tree yonder, which was struck by lightning when we camped here last, and she had been hitched near, and there the prisoner had found her."

"Then that means there was a traitor in camp?"

"It looks so, chief."

"A saddle and bridle went with her?"

"Yes, chief, the prisoner's, and his own weapons."

"Ah! that proves he was aided to escape, does it not, Señor Antonio?"

"It looks so, Señor Chief."

"And you were in command?"

The Mexican was silent, for he knew not what to say.

"And, Señor Antonio," continued Don Diaz, in a threatening, cynical manner:

"There is another thing that I hold against you."

"Yes, señor."

"You told me that you had killed the Masked Man, who has been our bitter foe?"

"Yes, señor."

"I sent Señor Carlos on his trail, with Lopez there, and you came back, you with the report that he had killed the lieutenant, but that you and Lopez, brave fellows that you are, had slain the Masked Unknown, and also the Mad Hermit."

"I believed you then."

"We believed that we had killed them, Señor Chief."

"Yes, you believed so; but never consider an enemy dead until you have attended his burial."

"You had an eye on Carlos's place, and so lied to me, and in fact I believe you killed the lieutenant yourself and made up, with Lopez, this story, that you might step into the shoes of your officer."

"No, Señor Don Diaz, oh, no!" cried the now thoroughly alarmed man, while Lopez said quickly:

"No, Señor Chief, you wrong us both, for we saw the Masked Rider fall from his horse, and then the Hermit also fell at our fire."

The chief laughed mockingly and continued:

"Well, I gave you the place of lieutenant, and left you in command of the camp, and you allow the prisoner, Prairie Pilot, to escape, perhaps aided him yourself."

"No, señor, no! I am no traitor!"

"There is a traitor in this camp, so why not suspect you as well as another?"

"I had intended to make an example of that man, Prairie Pilot, so that it would make Texas Jack very careful how he and his Terrors dogged my tracks; but he has gone, and I can only set an example to my own band to let them understand that I will stand no trifling."

"I will let them know that I will not allow a man to come in and lie to me, and that the one who is in command of my camp in my absence, is responsible with his life for the keeping of my prisoners."

"This gentleman, Señor Fontaine, has come to join us, and he has come just in time to step into your shoes, Señor Antonio, for as he saved my life, I shall make him my lieutenant."

"I will yield, Señor Chief, with pleasure to the señor," said Antonio, eagerly.

"Doubtless; but I do not ask it, for, as I shall punish you, your term as an officer will promptly end."

"Señor Antonio, and you, Lopez, prepare for

death, as you have just five minutes of life left to you."

"It is now five minutes to twelve o'clock, and at noon exactly you must die."

He took out his watch as he spoke and placed it on a camp-stool by his side.

Then he drew a revolver and laid it alongside of the watch.

A thrill of horror ran through the crowd, and Ethan Fontaine looked at the chief in a surprised and startled manner.

He recalled that Don Diaz had said he should take Señor Antonio's place, and that the Mexican would soon leave it vacant.

This, then, was to be the way he retired from office, at the muzzle of the chief's revolver.

Ethan Fontaine cast his eye down the line of faces.

Before him stood two-score men, and in spite of their being accustomed to scenes of death almost daily, and branded with outlawry for crimes committed, they looked ill at ease at what they then had to face.

His eyes fell upon Señor Antonio.

He had turned to a sickly hue, and stood like one who had lost all power of feeling.

By his side was Lopez, nervous, restless and with scared face and trembling form.

There was one thing that Ethan Fontaine could not understand, and that was, why, if the two men thus condemned to die, believed that their cruel chief intended to kill them, why they did not draw their revolvers and open fire upon him.

It could be only death to them either way, and if they made a bold stand they might escape.

Antonio ranked next to the chief, so why not kill Don Diaz and be chief in his stead?

So ran the thoughts of Ethan Fontaine, and it was just what he would have done had he been situated as was Don Diaz.

But there the two men stood, while their comrades gazed upon them with varied thoughts in the mind of each.

"One minute more! take your places there, just ten paces from me, and three feet apart."

The voice of Don Diaz was unmoved, and mechanically the men obeyed.

Perhaps in their hearts was a hope that the chief meant not to kill them, that he would only frighten them.

With this belief, it seemed, they assumed an air of bravado which they did not feel, and took their stands.

Then the chief turned to Ethan Fontaine and asked in a quiet way:

"Señor Fontaine, what kind of a shot are you?"

"A good one, Señor Chief."

"Well, sir, as you are to step into Señor Antonio's shoes, you might as well remove the obstacle to your promotion, and at the same time let the men know you have nerve, so take your revolver, and when I give the word, fire, and let the man's forehead be your target."

Ethan Fontaine paled at the command, for such he knew it to be, but he did not flinch.

He had started on the downward road, so he would not swerve from it, and he drew his revolver, while he said calmly:

"I am ready, Señor Chief."

"One, two, three—fire!"

The revolvers cracked together, and the two victims fell in their tracks.

The dead-shot executioners had done their work well.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DON ON THE TRAIL.

NOT a word was spoken when the two men fell dead, at the fire of Don Diaz and Ethan Fontaine.

Neither Antonio nor Lopez had been favorites, but yet the men felt that the chief had gone too far, and dark looks were upon every side.

No one spoke, no one said a word against the act, for that one knew it would end his life then and there to raise his voice against the chief.

But all looked sullen, and their eyes were upon Don Diaz.

He at once realized that he had gone too far.

His men had been faithful to him, and to kill two of them as he had done, because a prisoner had escaped, and for telling him they had killed the Masked Rider and Mad Hermit, was going too far.

The chief regretted his act the moment it was done, not on account of the victims, not for conscience's sake, but because he thought it might lose him his prestige with the men.

He saw their sullen looks, but appearing not to notice them, said:

"Men, I happen to know that there have been traitors in our midst, and you know the penalty for a traitor in our band."

"Two of them I have just gotten rid of, and, thanks to this gentleman, one more bit the dust, though a fourth escaped."

"I refer to Chestnut Charlie and Trapper Tim."

"The last is dead, the former will doubtless lead Texas Jack and his Terrors upon us, for they joined our band for this purpose."

"You can understand now why Prairie Pilot escaped, for that man, his friend, Antonio, aided him."

"This stranger, whose nerve and dead-shot shooting you have just witnessed, saved your chief and you from the hangman."

"I therefore make him my lieutenant, and you will obey him as such."

"He will lead you back to our Mexican retreat, except those whom I need with me, and I promise you to return well laden with booty and rich plunder at that."

"Now to your camps."

The cool bearing of the chief, the charges he made against the two dead men, and the praise he bestowed upon Ethan Fontaine, extricated him from a very awkward situation.

The ugly humor of the men changed, and instead of trouble, which would surely have followed, the men went off with a higher regard for their chief and a special admiration for the new lieutenant, who could not have made his coming into the band a greater success, than by doing them, as Don Diaz had said, a great service, and thereby, without a tremor, sent his bullet to the brain of Antonio.

After a few hours passed in camp, Don Diaz rode out of it at the head of two dozen picked men, armed to the teeth and mounted upon the very best horses in the band.

Soon after Ethan Fontaine, with the camp plunder, a few wounded and the captured cattle, guarded by a dozen men, started for the Rio Grande, the destination being the stronghold in Mexico, to which Don Diaz was wont to retreat when hot pressed on the Texas border.

The object which Don Diaz had in mind was the capture of the emigrant train.

He had been informed by Mexican Moses that Colonel Fontaine had considerable money with him, and much that was valuable.

Mr. Langley was also well supplied with funds, and the others of the train were all well to do people.

The cattle were of the best, the wagons and horses valuable, and he expected to get a very rich haul by the capture of the train.

Then, too, he believed that by the capture of Adèle Fontaine he could get a large ransom.

Mexican Moses he feared was dead, not for the treacherous guide's sake, but for the loss his death would be to him.

He supposed that the guide had been quickly strung up by the emigrants, if, as he feared, he had been suspected of treachery, and being his ally.

As he looked for no aid therefore from him, he determined to go to the spot where he had left the train, follow its trail until he knew just which way it was going, and then flank it and lie in ambush until its coming at some point where he would have every advantage.

If, as he feared, Texas Jack's Terrors were abroad, through the escape of Prairie Pilot, he would be strong enough to cope with them, while, with no fear for his camp outfit, which he had sent to Mexico under Ethan Fontaine, he could retreat rapidly, if need be, and cross the Rio Grande where he pleased.

He had not wished to have Ethan Fontaine along, well knowing he would not lend aid to capture his father's train, and the chief had acquainted himself with the fact that the young scapegrace did not know his father and sister were in Texas, nor suspect their coming.

"They have come here to redeem the fellow, if they can," said the chief to himself, for he was not aware of the failure of Colonel Fontaine in his business, and hence the loss of his fortune.

If he could also strike a blow, by ambush, or surprise, at Texas Jack and his Terrors, Don Diaz meant to do so, for with them out of his way, before soldiers could be brought upon his trail he could sweep along the border settlements and enrich himself, getting his cattle and plunder into Mexico, where he would be safe, and could lie quiet for some months.

Knowing the country as he did, the Red Revolver Ranger chief was not long in finding the trail of the train, and he set out to follow it and carry out his cruel plot.

CHAPTER XXX.

TO THE RESCUE.

WHEN Bessie Langley gave utterance to the cry, that the one who suddenly dashed out of the timber to their rescue was the Masked Steer Rider, the sensation of joy that came over her almost caused her to lose consciousness and she clutched at the saddle-horn to keep from falling.

But it was but a second's faintness, and recovering herself she turned to Adèle, who had saved with perfect confidence in her rescuer, in spite of the odds against him:

"We are saved."

Bessie well knew that Adèle's horse was the fleetest of the two and the least fatigued, while she was aware that her fair companion could have gone on and left her to fall a victim to the pursuing Indians, and once she had told her to do so.

"You can escape, Adèle, so do so, for both of

us need not perish, and you can tell them of my fate," she had said.

Adèle had given her one look and uttered her name in a tone of sad reproach:

"Bessie!"

That was all that she said, but it brought quickly the words:

"Forgive me, Adèle."

Then had come the Wild Steer Rider into sight.

This time he was mounted on the snow-white steer, as large and powerful as the black one, and seemingly as swift.

But the mysterious rider was masked as before.

He came on like the wind, his rifle across his arm ready for use, and his herd was not with him.

Straight toward him rode the two girls, and as they drew near to him they saw that he was throwing his rifle to his shoulder.

The Indians had slackened speed, but only for a moment, as they wished to see what was to follow the Steer Rider.

Seeing that he was alone, they came on again with yells that caused Adèle and Bessie to shudder.

The prize they were after was not to be given up for fear of one man.

"Oh, Adèle, he intends to meet them!" cried Bessie, as the Masked Rider swerved from his direct course.

"Yes, he seems utterly fearless, and I only hoped he would fire on them so as to frighten them; but see, he has rested his lance and has his rifle ready," and both Adèle and Bessie gazed with the deepest interest, allied to awe, at the Steer Rider.

They had noticed on the left horn of the sable steer an iron hook, near the point, and now they saw its use, for the white steer was similarly equipped, as the lance-end was laid upon it, the other end resting in a loop swung from the belt of the rider, thus giving him the full use of his hands without throwing down his guidon, for such it seemed to be used for, to guide the herd, rather than a weapon.

Several times the Masked Rider raised his rifle and lowered it, for he seemed to wish to be sure of his aim.

Then he called out in a voice clear, ringing and commanding:

"Ride for the timber and await me there."

It was more like a command than a request; but it was no time to choose his manner of speaking.

As he spoke, his rifle went once more to his shoulder, and this time the flash and report followed.

The maidens were near him then, hardly fifty feet away; but at once Adèle said:

"We will halt, too, and not run off like cowards, Bessie."

"Yes, Adèle, we will not leave him," responded Bessie, and the two girls came to a halt as the Wild Steer Rider swept on.

They saw that one of the red-skins had fallen under the deadly aim of the Masked Rider, even had not the wild yells told them that the bullet had gone true.

But they were amazed to see that the Steer Rider did not halt, but kept straight on toward his foes.

Then again his rifle rose to his shoulder, and a second shot told as the first had done.

A shower of arrows, and a shot from one red-skin, who had a revolver, was poured upon the daring Steer Rider, but he seemed not to regard it in the least, and held on toward them.

But the red-skins were not to be driven off so easily, though one of their number lay dead, and another writhing in agony, and they sprung to the ground, made their horses lie down, and took them as a breastwork to fight behind.

Then to the lips of the Masked Rider went his bugle, and it sent forth a ringing call.

A roar like thunder answered it, and from the timber dashed forth half a hundred steers.

This was too much for the red-skins, and as the Demon Herd came on like mad, bellowing with rage, they seized their dead and wounded comrades, and mounting their ponies, rode away in terror.

Then the Wild Steer Rider turned the snow-white animal he bestrode, and gave several bugle-blasts to check the rush of the herd.

"See how they obey! they are trained like soldiers," cried Adèle, as the herd came to a halt and went to feeding quietly about where they had stopped.

The next moment the Unknown drew rein near where Adèle and Bessie sat on their panting horses awaiting him.

He touched his hat politely, and said, somewhat sternly:

"I am surprised to see young ladies alone on the prairie, after the lesson of danger they had two days ago."

"I assure you, sir, it is not our fault, and yet I can hardly say that either, for we came in chase of the guide's horse, I having seen him turn him loose after fastening a paper to the saddle-horn," said Adèle, slightly nettled at his words and manner.

"Ah! that was a messenger-horse then, for I have heard that Don Diaz had several trained

animals to bring him dispatches; but was not the guide a prisoner, Miss Fontaine?"

"Yes, but as he was acting as guide he was given some liberty."

"We, Miss Langley and myself, pursued the horse, and went too far, so were lost as we could not find the train."

"When was this, please?"

"Last evening, a short while before sunset."

"And you have passed the night on the prairie?" he asked, in a tone that showed great surprise.

"Yes, sir, in a motte some miles away, where we found a fire."

"You have been most unfortunate, and yet fortunate, too, as you have escaped being captured."

"Through your coming to our rescue alone, sir, so we owe you another debt of gratitude," Adèle said, earnestly.

"Permit me to guide and escort you to your train," he replied, somewhat coldly, and then added: "You were unable to catch the outlaw's horse?"

"Yes."

"And Mexican Moses?"

"Is with the train, of course."

"Did he know why you pursued his horse?"

"No, I think not."

"It is better so; but let us be off, for we have a long ride before us," and he led the way over the trail that he had come, both Adèle and Bessie miffed at his cold manner, which almost amounted to rudeness, they thought.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AGAIN A PRISONER.

BOTH Adèle and Bessie wondered how it was that their Masked Guide found his way over the trackless prairie.

He had asked them just when it was that they had left the train, and then had set out in a direction contrary to the one where they had expected the train to be.

He followed no trail, simply went in a straight line over the prairie, having given a call upon his bugle for his herd to follow him, which they did, trotting along some distance behind.

The Unknown rode in front, ambling along on his white steer, which seemed not to regard his weight in the slightest.

The Comanches had disappeared from sight, and the herd, half a hundred in number, were as quiet as lambs, cropping grass here and there as they came along, and very little like the maddened, bellowing, rushing animals of a short while before.

Looking back at the herd Adèle said to Bessie:

"He has evidently been to his home, wherever that may be, since he left the train, for he is not mounted upon his black steer, you see, nor is it in the herd."

"No, I noticed that, and he has only a fourth of the number he had when he saved the train," returned Bessie, in the same low tone.

"I wonder who he is," Adèle said, after a short silence.

"I give it up," was the response.

"But if his face is as handsome as his form, he's a dangerous fellow to be about where girls are."

"Maybe he knows that, and so hides his face out of kindness to us."

"Bessie, you are always fond of a joke," Adèle remarked, with a smile.

"And a young man; but if you asked him, Adèle, maybe he'd show us his face."

Adèle looked really startled at the suggestion, and Bessie laughed, which caused the Steer Rider to look around and remark:

"I must congratulate you, young ladies, upon your nerve."

"Thank you; but do you think it fair for us to be known to you, and you not let us know who you are?" boldly said Bessie, notwithstanding Adèle's deprecating look to her.

"I am known to but one person, Miss Langley, for such, I believe, is your name, and I shall so remain until I accomplish a certain purpose, or death reveals me as I am!" and the sternness had gone from his voice, which sunk to a low, sad tone that told those who heard him that he was a man with a history, one who had sorrow for a close comrade.

Then he quickly said:

"Do you see yonder bunch on the prairie, that looks like a bush?"

"Well, your train is there, for, as I expected it would, after you were lost, it moved but a short distance to a camping-place, and the prairie is now doubtless being searched for you."

"Oh, what trouble and anxiety we have caused; but then I wished to see what that treacherous man had written, and sent away by his horse," said Adèle.

"I think I can guess that it was a note to Don Diaz his chief, telling him to ambush the train at some other point."

"You do not believe his story then of who he is?"

"By no means; the man is a Red Revolver Ranger and I shall so prove him to be."

For some time they rode on in silence, and as

the timber came plainly into their view the girls saw that it was the camping-place of the train.

Then several parties rode forth from the timber as they were discovered, and the maidens recognized Colonel Fontaine and Mr. Langley.

They came on at a gallop, and a few minutes after they were warmly welcomed, and with a quivering voice Colonel Fontaine said to the Steer Rider:

"We owe you another lasting debt of gratitude, sir, for we had given up all hope of ever seeing them alive again."

"It was my good fortune to be near, sir; but have you let your guide escape?" and there was the old coldness of manner in the way the Steer Rider spoke, which was either intentional or natural to him.

"No, he is in camp and seemed greatly distressed at the fate the girls were almost certain to meet, he said."

"Does he know why Miss Fontaine left in chase of his horse?"

"To catch him for him."

"Miss Fontaine, will you please explain why you went after the guide's horse?"

"Yes, sir, it was because I saw the guide writing, and then he slipped a piece of paper under a string around his saddle-horn and deliberately let his horse go, starting him off with a peculiar blow which I noticed."

All looked surprised at this, and the Masked Steer Rider asked:

"Colonel Fontaine, may I claim that prisoner from you?"

"If you really deem him guilty, as you say."

"I do, sir, and I will say to you to go no further on your trail until you hear from me."

"Where your train is now encamped is an excellent halting-place, and you can rest there a couple of days and keep your guards constantly on the alert the while."

"Were it in my power to serve as your guide, I would do so, but circumstances which I cannot explain, prevent me from going beyond a day's ride from this vicinity; but I will send to you a guide who will be a protection to you, and at the same time carry you by a trail which will put the Red Revolver Rangers off your track."

"My dear sir, I will be wholly guided by you in this matter, for already have you proven yourself our most valuable friend, and I only wish you would say how we can return your kindness."

"By surrendering to me your late guide, Mexican Moses; that is all I ask."

"Would you kill him, sir?" asked Adèle, quickly.

"Miss Fontaine, I am not the man to take life without just cause; but I will see that Mexican Moses leads no more women and children into a death-trap."

Before more could be said they rode up to the camp, and a joyous welcome was given to the returned maidens, while Mexican Moses said:

"Well, ladies, I was so glad that you was found, and mine frint v'at t'inks I was a wicked mans he was all around mit t' right places, don't he?"

"Mexican Moses, hands up quick!"

There was no mistaking the tone or the action of the Masked Rider, for his revolver covered the treacherous guide, who had been allowed to go free by those of the train who should have known better than to trust him.

But his apparent grief at the loss of the young girls, and his oily tongue, had deceived even Colonel Fontaine.

"Mine frint—"

"Don't trifle with me, sir!" and the voice of the Unknown rung out like a trumpet.

Mexican Moses promptly obeyed, and in another moment he was again a prisoner and securely bound.

"Now you go with me, Mexican Moses, for I will furnish you a mount, if Colonel Fontaine will lend me a saddle."

"With pleasure, sir," and as the colonel spoke, the Unknown gave a call on his bugle and a large red steer came trotting out of the herd and halted near his master.

The Unknown quickly strapped the saddle upon him, and with an exhibition of strength that surprised all, seized the guide and placed him in it, while he remarked:

"I'll not bind you to the saddle, Mexican Moses, for should you fall off, my steers will pick you up, so be careful."

"And you will need no bridle, for Red-skin will obey me, not you— Ah! there comes a horseman," and all eyes were turned across the prairie to where a horse and rider had caught the eye of the Unknown.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN DANGEROUS HANDS.

THE horseman seen approaching the encampment of the train was mounted upon a horse that came forward at a swift lope, and yet did not appear to suffer from the gait.

As he drew nearer he was seen to be a man clad in buckskin, wearing a sombrero and with hair that rose and fell with the motion of his horse, for it was worn long.

The guard did not halt him as he rode up, but the stranger asked:

"Is this the train of Colonel Fontaine?"
"It is, sir, and the colonel is yonder in that group," was the reply.

"Thank you," and the man rode on to the group, who were awaiting him, and, springing from his horse, said:

"I would speak to Colonel Fontaine."

"I am he, sir," and the colonel stepped forward, while now the eyes of all rested upon the horse ridden by the stranger, and which it seemed they recognized.

"I am known as Prairie Pilot, sir, and I was sent by Texas Jack to guide you from Waco to your ranch; but I was ambushed by Red Revolver Rangers, my horse killed, and they took me to their retreat, from whence I escaped several nights ago."

"I hope I have not arrived too late to be of service to you, for I know that the Red Rangers left camp to attack you."

"My dear sir, I am glad to meet you, and your coming relieves us of anxiety, as well as places this man in a very sad plight."

"Do you know him?" and the colonel pointed to Mexican Moses, who held down his head and had become very pale.

"I think, sir, I saw him several times in the camp of the Red Revolver Rangers."

"It is not so!" suddenly cried Mexican Moses.

"I am not an outlaw, but an honest guide."

"What has become of your broken English, Moses, for you seem to have forgotten it?"

It was the Masked Unknown who asked the question, and seeing that he had but further betrayed himself, the outlaw gritted his teeth with rage.

The remark of the Unknown caused Prairie Pilot to turn to him and ask:

"Are you the man they speak of as the Unknown?"

"I am unknown, I believe, to every one here, so may be so called, sir; but I know you as one of Texas Jack's Terrors, and I also am aware that this man belongs to the band of Red Revolver Rangers," replied the Masked Steer Rider.

"From all accounts you should know, for it is said that you follow the trail of the Red Rangers like a bloodhound," rejoined Prairie Pilot.

"I have my reasons for doing so," was the quiet remark, and those who heard him thought that his air was full of sadness.

"I would like to ask, sir, how you came by that horse?" and Adèle referred to the animal which the Prairie Pilot had ridden there.

It was the guide that she addressed, and he replied:

"The horse that I left the outlaw retreat with, miss, went lame, and I was forced to desert him on the trail, but I was so fortunate as to catch this one with my lariat, and if I mistake not he belongs to this man."

"No, no, he is not my horse, but very much like him, I admit."

"I had a different saddle and bridle," and Mexican Moses spoke nervously.

"I had my own saddle and bridle with me when I caught him, so threw those that were on him away."

Mexican Moses looked relieved at this, while Adèle asked:

"Did you find a piece of paper tied to the horn of the saddle which was on the horse when you caught him, sir?"

"I did, miss, and I brought it with me, hoping that I was not too late to save you all trouble."

"Here it is."

He took from his pocket the scrap of paper, which he had taken from the saddle-horn of the horse he had captured, and Colonel Fontaine read it aloud.

All eyes were turned upon Mexican Moses when the colonel finished the treacherous message, and the outlaw cried excitedly:

"Colonel, this is a conspiracy against me, for these two men are pards."

"I doubt no longer, sir, and you can congratulate yourself that you have not had Texans to deal with, or they would at once string you up to a tree," the colonel said, sternly.

"This man will kill me, for you have given me up to him."

"As soon as we are out of sight of the train, he will shoot me down like a dog, for I am unable to protect myself."

"It would serve you just right," said Prairie Pilot, sternly, while Adèle remarked, earnestly:

"No, no, he is not one to do an act like that; but he will doubtless turn you over to the authorities for punishment."

"Thank you, Miss Fontaine, for your good opinion," and the Unknown bowed, while Mexican Moses responded with a sneer:

"Authorities! why, the revolver and the rope are the authorities here on this border."

"If there was more of the latter and less of the former, such as you are would not curse Texas with your presence."

"But you are here for plunder, and you must take the consequences of your acts."

"Will you, sir, remain as the guide to Colonel Fontaine's train?"

And the Unknown turned to Prairie Pilot.

"With pleasure; and I wish you could get word to my captain, Texas Jack, how matters are going."

"I am going there now, sir, and this man accompanies."

"Come, Mexican Moses, I am ready."

"Let me ride my horse."

"No; he has work enough; you ride Red-skin, and I have already warned you not to fall off."

And with a courtly bow, worthy of a drawing-room, the mysterious man sprang upon the back of his white steer and rode away, Red-skin keeping close to him and the Demon Herd falling in behind as he went by where they were feeding on the prairie.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE COWBOY CAPTAIN AT HOME.

TEXAS JACK was becoming very anxious about Prairie Pilot, for he had not heard a word of the train he was to guide, and he had heard that the Red Revolver Rangers were on the war-path.

After the visit to him of the Masked Rider he had, it will be remembered, followed his trail back to the scene where he was ambushed by the unfortunate Antonio, Lopez and Carlos, and had been saved from death or capture by the timely arrival of the Mad Hermit and his Demon Herd.

Texas Jack and his Cowboy Rangers were splendid scouts, and they read "signs" on the prairie like an open book; but they were thrown at fault by what they saw that day and followed the track of the outlaws, believing that the Masked Horseman had been slain and then trampled to death, for his horse was there, and the body of Carlos, the lieutenant of the Red Revolver Rangers was taken for that of the mysterious visitor to the ranch of the cowboy captain.

The trail of the outlaws was not followed far before it was lost in a stream, and then Texas Jack and his men returned and the cowboys went back to their various homes and duties.

Their captain was surprised some days after by two men coming toward his ranch who had caught Coon's eye.

That sable worthy was brave as a lion, but he dashed into the little fenced-in vegetable-garden where the scout was at work and called out, excitedly:

"Lor', Mars' Jack, jist come here, sah, only too quick, for dat Mad Hermit what rides cattle is a-comin', sah, 'fore de Lor' he is."

Texas Jack had been anxious to have a closer look at the Mad Hermit than he had so far been able to obtain, and so he hastened to his cabin.

His first duty was to get his rifle and revolver at hand, and then he lighted his pipe and took his accustomed seat by his cabin door.

There came two men, it was true, mounted upon steers, one riding a huge white animal, the other a red one of equal size.

Behind them, just halted upon the prairie, were some fifty head of splendid cattle, long-bodied, well-built, large animals, that seemed to have been picked for their size and the length of their massive horns.

They were of all colors, and when the rider of the white steer waved his lance several times, they came to a halt and went to feeding a few hundred yards from the cabin.

But the two riders came on, and Coon, from his point of observation in the cabin, regarded them with great curiosity and considerable misgiving.

"Men hain't right thet rides steers, Mars' Jack," he whispered, as the two Steer Riders advanced.

"By Jupiter! but it's my Unknown Pard," said Jack, as the man on the white steer drew near, and he added:

"But who is the fellow with him?—and if he isn't tied hand and foot, you can shoot me for a coyote."

"Good-afternoon, Captain Omohundro."

"You see I have called again," and the stranger dismounted as he spoke.

"Yes, and you are welcome, my Unknown Pard, for I really believed you dead, and am happy to see that I'm away off."

"Yes, you doubtless followed me and saw the body in the valley, mistaking it for mine, as it was trampled out of all shape, and the horse left there was mine."

"You are right, for that is just what I did do; but who is your pard?"

"A prisoner, and one whom I have brought you to look after, as he is one of the Red Revolver Rangers."

"Ah! then his life is short, I fear; but you have proof, for I would not make a dog suffer if he was innocent, though I confess this fellow's face is not prepossessing."

"I will give you my proof, and I have come to seek your aid."

"You have my pledge to help you; but will you need more men?"

"Every man you have, and as soon as you can get them, for the Red Revolver Rangers are your game, and promptness may save many lives."

"Coon!"

"Yes, Mars' Jack," and Coon appeared, glowering uneasily at the masked face of the visitor.

"I wish all of my men, and in all haste, Coon."

"Yes, sah, I brings 'em."

"How d'y', boss," and Coon cast an eye at the mysterious man talking to his master, who replied pleasantly:

"How are you, Coon?"

"Lordy, he knows me," muttered Coon, as he walked away, wondering that the stranger had called him by name, for he did not notice that he had heard Texas Jack address him as Coon.

"He mighty likely-lookin' gemman, but I skeert o' any man as rides a steer," continued Coon as he climbed the tree to light his signal-fires.

"May I ask, sir, where we are to go?" said Texas Jack, as Coon walked away.

"You sent one of your Rangers, Prairie Pilot, to guide a train from Waco to the former ranch of Ethan Fontaine?"

"Yes, and I am most anxious about him."

"You had reason to be, for he was ambushed by Red Revolver Rangers, and—"

"Killed? By Heaven! but blood shall flow for this!" and the Ranger Scout's eyes flashed fire.

"No, he was not killed, but captured and held in the outlaw retreat until he made his escape."

"And glad am I that he did escape; but I am surprised that they captured Pilot."

"We all get caught sometimes."

"True, but where is Pilot?"

"With the train."

"And it is Colonel Fontaine's train?"

"Yes, and this man, Mexican Moses, was the guide up to a short while ago."

"He brought them from Waco?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you say he is an outlaw?"

"Don Diaz got possession of your letter to Colonel Fontaine, and wrote one himself, speaking of Mexican Moses as the guide, and signing your name to it."

"This man was supposed to have come from you, and he led the train into what nearly proved to be an ambush, for Don Diaz had his spies meet him on the trail and post him of the movements of the train; but I happened upon the scene, and my herd of wild steers put the Red Revolver Rangers to flight."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, sir."

"A herd of wild steers put Don Diaz and his men to flight?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many had he?"

"Twenty or more."

"I cannot believe it."

"If you ever see my Demon Herd in a mad charge, Captain Omohundro, you will be convinced that they would stampede a regiment of cavalry."

"You are a remarkable man, my Unknown Pard; but how is it you lead the herd of the Mad Hermit?"

"That, sir, is a secret I prefer to keep to myself," was the cold response.

"Pardon me; but you saved the train?"

"My Demon Herd did, and I then branded this man as treacherous; but he was kept on and managed to send his horse, which was one of Don Diaz's messenger steeds, off to the retreat with a note to his chief telling where he could again ambush the train."

"Your guide, Prairie Pilot, caught the horse, and, having just escaped from the outlaws, was on his way to join the train, and he arrived while I was there, so the proof against this man was all that was necessary, and I brought him here to give him up to you."

"Well, his career will close at a rope's end when my Rangers come, for we will try him on the facts you give, and I know what his sentence will be."

"It is a lie, and that man only seeks to get rid of me."

"He is an outlaw himself and only seeks to get me out of the way to save himself," cried Mexican Moses.

Texas Jack turned to the Masked Steer Rider as though for him to explain this charge.

"As I am unknown to Captain Omohundro, I simply allow my record as the bitter foe of the Red Revolver Rangers to stand against your word, Mexican Moses, or I am willing to surrender myself a prisoner to the Cowboy Rangers to return with me and you to the train, upon condition that they then and there hang the guilty man," and that the Unknown meant all that he said Texas Jack had no doubt.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BORDER DUEL.

THE remark of the Unknown seemed to banish all suspicion from the mind of the Cowboy Captain, which the words of the outlaw had aroused, for he had made a charge which for an instant had the appearance of truth on the face of it.

"I have no doubt, Unknown Pard, but that you have told the whole truth about this man; but there are men in my band who will know him, I am sure, and his fate will be quickly settled."

Mexican Moses was taken aback at the words of Omohundro, for his quick eyes had detected

that he had at least cast suspicion upon the Unknown.

But he rallied for another chance to get the best of the affair.

So he said, and with the semblance of truth in his tone and look:

"Texas Jack, I am an honest trapper, and I was in Waco when I found the captain of the train looking for a guide, for he said the one he expected had disappointed him.

"It was good pay and I took the job, and we ran upon the Red Revolver Rangers on the trail.

"This man, whom I charge with the murder of the Mad Hermit, and then taking his herd of trained steers, came to the train and accused me of treachery and belonging to the outlaw band of Don Diaz.

"It was useless for me to deny it, for they believed this man who is ashamed and afraid to show his face.

"So I was seized, bound, and they allowed this man to take me with him, and he brought me here, hoping you would believe his story and put me to death.

"Now I am willing to risk my life on my words, and I'll face him with the revolver, you to second us both, and the living man to go his way.

"He will not dare accept my offer."

Texas Jack glanced toward the Unknown after the challenge of the outlaw to see what he had to say.

"I will say, Captain Omohundro, that I repeat my charge that this man was sent by Don Diaz as guide to the train to lead it into an ambush, he having your letter to Colonel Fontaine, which his men had taken from your guide, Prairie Pilot.

"This man, Mexican Moses, did lead the train into an ambush, but I arrived in time to check its advance to destruction.

"I then met, two days after, Miss Fontaine and another young lady upon the prairie, lost, for they had gone to catch this man's horse, which he had set loose with a note tied to the saddle-horn.

"It was a messenger-horse, and the animal escaped the young ladies, though Miss Fontaine had seen the note attached to the saddle.

"She accused this man upon her return, and I was about to bring him a prisoner to you, when who should appear but Prairie Pilot.

"He had lamed his horse, the animal he had escaped from the outlaws with, and had seen the messenger-horse and captured him.

"He had found the note, and hastened on to the train, fearing it would get into danger, as he knew Don Diaz with two dozen picked men, had gone to hunt it up.

"This is why I came here, sir, to place this man in your keeping and ask you to take the trail with your Terrors and guard the train to its destination, and my idea was for you to give the outlaws a surprise by not letting them expect to find other than the emigrants themselves to defend it."

"Such is a good idea, sir, and—"

"All talk, Texas Jack, and to dodge meeting me as I propose," cried the outlaw.

"You are mistaken, Mexican Moses, for I accept your challenge with pleasure, yes, absolute pleasure, if Captain Omohundro will act as second for us," was the quiet reply.

"I will do so, yes; but my opinion is that you are guilty, Moses, and we had better hang you when my Rangers come."

"No! no! he has agreed to meet me, and it must be so."

"Yes; I will meet you."

"And remember, if I kill you, I go free."

Texas Jack demurred at this, for he said:

"Your killing the Unknown will not prove your innocence, and I should hate to have you escape, if guilty."

"Oh, yes; let him have his way, for I am willing, and, if he kills me, he can go free," was the indifferent response of the Masked Steer Rider.

But there was something in his tone that Mexican Moses did not like.

He seemed too indifferent to the danger of a duel to the death.

"You mean it, Pard Unknown?"

"I do."

"And you, Texas Jack?"

"If the Unknown Steer Rider is willing to risk the duel, on condition that you go free, if you kill him, I say yes also."

"Very well, let us get to work."

"No, wait for my Rangers, for they would not miss it for the world," said the Cowboy Captain.

"I have no time to fool away, for I have already lost my pay by this man, and must return to my trapping."

"Let us fight at once."

"What do you say, Unknown Pard?" and Texas Jack turned to the Steer Rider.

"I am willing, in fact would prefer it, for I have work to do."

"Then you do not intend to go with my Rangers to guard the train?"

"No, there is no need of my services with Texas Jack and his Terrors to defend the train."

"You are complimentary; but let us have this duel over with."

Mexican Moses seemed only too anxious.

He wished to get away before the arrival of any of Texas Jack's Rangers, for he had seen the signal smoke going up from the tree-top, which Coon had made to call in the Terrors, and he was well aware that some of them knew him as he really was, and his fate would be certain did he delay until their arrival.

Then, too, he had little dread of the result.

He was known among the Red Revolver Rangers as the quickest and deadliest shot of the band, and where there was to be a duel he did not for an instant doubt that he could send a bullet into the brain of the Masked Steer Rider before he could fire upon him.

Coon had now returned, and was an interested observer of what was going on, as he saw his master stepping off ten paces before the cabin door, for that was the distance agreed upon.

"Have you anything to suggest, Unknown Pard?" asked Texas Jack, as he stood ready.

"You give the word and we open fire, sir, until one is dead, or both."

"That's good, but I needs but one shot," said Mexican Moses and it was said to disconcert his foe.

"Very well, one shot is enough if sent to the center of the target; but I will give the word, 'One, two, three, fire!'"

"The man that fires before the word fire, I will kill myself, so beware, Mexican Moses."

"Why not tell Mask to beware also?" queried the outlaw.

"Because I somehow think he intends to play fair in this game."

"So will I."

"See that you do, or I chip in with a trump."

"I do not know how either of you shoot, but I do know that if I am to run this game, there will be square dealing on both sides."

"Are you ready?"

"I am, sir," responded the Steer Rider, while Mexican Moses growled forth:

"I'm always ready for a game of this kind."

Each man stood with revolver in hand, just ten paces apart and in front of the cabin, where Coon stood in the door watching proceedings with a look upon his face as though he well knew there would be some one hurt or killed.

Texas Jack stood to one side as serene as a May morn, and he said, with a smile:

"If it is you, Pard Unknown, I claim your steers as a legacy."

"You can have them if I go under, and if you mount the white one he will take you to where the rest of the herd is," was the reply.

"Thank you."

"Ready! one! two! three! fire!"

Whatever Mexican Moses had thought of his quickness in aiming and drawing the trigger, he never discovered that he had more than met his match, for he was a dead man before he could fire his revolver, while Texas Jack exclaimed, with admiration:

"Pard Unknown, that was the quickest and best shot I ever saw—right between the eyes."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE OUTLAWS' QUEEN.

I WILL now follow the band of Red Revolver Rangers who went under their new lieutenant, Ethan Fontaine, into Mexico.

There was one man whom the chief told his lieutenant to call on for any advice he might need, and his name was Lariat Lou.

He was a young man, with an evil, yet good-looking face, blue eyes and long blonde hair.

It was said that he was as deadly with a lariat as a weapon as most men were with a revolver.

He always carried three lariats with him, though he did not neglect his revolvers, and he had been known to catch deer and wolves with the coil.

His horse was as fleet as a deer, and the man was such a devil that he was a favorite with his chief.

Ethan Fontaine had at least the decency to drop his own name, so as not to bring more disgrace upon his father and sister, and he had, by a strange humor, taken that of Lamar, a man to whom he owed his life and who had ever befriended him, though he had held the position on the ranchero's ranch as manager and head cowboy.

He had told Lariat Lou that he was to be known as Lamar, and so the men under his command called him.

They were not particular, and whatever name a man wished to hail under they were willing.

Whatever name he took, he was sure to get another, and the first day's ride was not ended before they called their new officer Lucky Lamar, for they considered that he had had a streak of remarkable good luck in becoming an officer of the Red Revolver Rangers from the first.

What they thought the next day was that they had not made a mistake in the name, for their first night's halt had been passed in a game of cards to "fleece the lieutenant," and the result was that he had turned the tables upon all who had played with him, and carried most of the money in the outfit when they started on their march the following morning.

"He hain't s'ch a fool as yer might take a tenderfoot ter be at ther first jump," said one of the men, and he but expressed the sentiments of all the others.

The Rio Grande was crossed without trouble, and no pursuers were on the trail, so the scout had reported, who had been hanging back several miles in the rear.

The outlaws were traveling slowly, with their wounded and plunder, and they camped soon after crossing the river on their second night out.

Then the game of cards was begun again, and Lariat Lou tried his luck with "Lamar," for he had held back the night before.

Lariat Lou was said to be as dextrous a hand with cards as he was with the lasso, and he always played to win; but somehow "Lucky" kept up his reputation, and the lasso-thrower's pile of dust was transferred to the pockets of the lieutenant before midnight.

The next morning at noon the retreat of the Red Revolver Rangers was reached.

When safe, Lariat Lou had suggested to the lieutenant to ride on and "get acquainted with the lay-out."

This Lamar had consented to do, and he soon found himself in dells of the mountains that were simply impregnable against attack, unless by a large force.

And yet, amid all this wildness and grandeur of scenery, there was a little glen, or valley, the picture of loveliness.

There amid a scene of beauty was a cabin, on the banks of a crystal stream and overhung and sheltered by massive trees.

Wild flowers covered the banks near, birds sang in the trees, the scent of flowers floated on the air, and the cozy cabin home, with its tiny piazza, looked to be the abode of love and happiness.

It was a cabin of three rooms, and the eye of the visitor would have been startled at the scene that met one's gaze within, for a velvety carpet covered the floor, the windows were hung with silk curtains, the furniture was graceful and luxurious, and there were costly *bric-a-brac* scattered about in profusion.

Even a piano stood in the room, and a guitar lay upon it.

Then there were books, fine paintings, and every indication that some one of wealth and refinement had made their home there in the fastnesses of those wild and rugged Mexican mountains.

A hammock swung between two large trees near the cabin, and it held an occupant, who was reading a book, as Lariat Lou and the new outlaw lieutenant approached, having left their horses at the outlaw camp at the entrance to the valley, a few hundred yards away.

A large St. Bernard dog raised his head and growled at the approach of the two men, and the occupant of the hammock quickly arose from her recumbent position and faced them, as they halted near.

"Well, Lariat Lou, where is your chief?" and the questioner turned upon the young outlaw with a look of inquiry, while she cast a quick, searching glance at his companion.

Lamar fairly started at the one he beheld suddenly rise from the hammock and confront him.

It was a woman, and a beautiful one.

Such a one as he would never expect to find in that wild land, and especially in a robber camp, unless a captive there, and this one seemed not to be.

Her form was exquisite, and clad in a soft, pale blue silk, while a wealth of hair, of a red-gold hue, hung about her shoulders in waving masses, a *negligé* that was most becoming.

Her face was lovely, and yet there was in it a touch of sadness most pathetic, with a look that was bitter and cynical, Lamar thought also, as though her life had known more of sorrow than joy.

Her eyes were large, expressive and searching; but there was tenderness in them also, though allied to passion, and the fire of anger that needed but a spark to enkindle it.

"Señora, I beg to introduce our new lieutenant, Señor Lamar."

"This lady, señor, is the Queen of the Red Revolver Rangers," and Lariat Lou bowed low before the beautiful woman as though she were in reality a queen.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A FAIR CAPTIVE.

IN the approach to the Mexican retreat of the Red Revolver Rangers, Lamar, as I shall call the new lieutenant of the band, had noticed that it would be next to impossible to surprise them, for there were canyons to go through, which at a dozen points could be defended by half a dozen men against a hun dred.

Then too the canyon seemed to have been the water-bed of a mountain-stream, and when Lamar so said to Lariat Lou, the outlaw replied:

"It is the bed of a stream, and one which a mile back is turned from its course by a dam which can be removed in five minutes, sending a torrent of water down this canyon which would sweep all to destruction."

"The chief has located his camp well."
"He has indeed, for this, and one other are the only approaches."

"The stream did flow down this canyon and one other, but it was divided, and, as I say, can again be thrown into this ravine, while you see, with the rocky walls there would be no escape."

"We have already passed a sentinel, but you did not see him, and he can communicate with the retreat, two miles away, by this canyon, by simply riding along the ridge a quarter of a mile, and thus a surprise-party coming to attack us would be surprised."

"Who is your chief, Lariat Lou?"

"You know all that I do, señor, or any one else that I have met."

"Some say he is a Mexican, and his Spanish is perfect, certainly."

"Others say he is an American, who fled to Mexico to escape punishment for his crimes, and doing the Government a service was made a captain of lancers."

"But he certainly was guilty of some act in Mexico that caused him to be outlawed, and he is an outlaw in Texas as well, so he has taken to the trails to gather taxes, and with his band, which he picked himself, he has made himself feared from the Red River to the City of Mexico, for he strikes at the Mexicans as well as the Texans."

"It is said that he is very rich, from the plunder he has stolen, and the gold he has robbed people of?"

"Yes, he has plenty of money, and is generous with his men, so they stick to him."

"As for plunder, he has it in plenty, and when you see his home you will find that he is a luxurious liver, even here in these wild mountains; but we are at the camps now."

As the Lariat-Thrower spoke they entered a valley, which the trail suddenly led into.

"Do you see that lake, señor?"

"Yes."

"Well, notice the little obstruction that turns the flow of water into yonder canyon, instead of the one we just came up."

"I see; but your camp is a large one, and delightfully located here in this valley."

"Yes, señor, and to reach it by the head of this valley would be a hard task, and men would have to go on foot, and where they enter the pass we have a sentinel."

"Do you see yonder cliff?"

"Yes."

"It is five miles away, and when a red flag flies there, it is a signal of danger, and a sentinel here has to watch that cliff for the flag by day, or a light by night."

"Yonder you see some of the wealth of Don Diaz," and the Lariat-Thrower pointed to the valley which was dotted with cattle and horses.

Where they were a number of cabins stood, under the shelter of the hills, and on the bank of the valley stream, and there were some fifty people visible, nearly half of whom were women and children, as wild and reckless-looking as the men of the band.

"Come, señor, we must go and see the Queen, so you can report to her."

"The Queen?"

"Yes, señor."

"Where is she, and who is she?"

"She dwells up the valley yonder, in as pretty a little house as one would find in the city, while, as to who she is, I can only say that she is as great a mystery as is the chief."

"And you call her your Queen?"

"Yes, but she has nothing to do with the band, but keeps aloof from them, though if any one is ill she is kind to them, and does all in her power."

"She is a beauty, too, and fairly idolizes the chief, though she knows all about him, and that he does not even trust her, for she is a captive."

"A prisoner?"

"She certainly is, and she has found it out, for she is not allowed to leave the valley, and when she rides about she is constantly watched; but yonder is the Bird's Nest, as the boys call her retreat, and you will fall in love with her at sight."

In this Lariat Lou was not far wrong, for Tamar was struck with wonder and admiration at beholding the beautiful woman, and also bowed low before her when introduced.

"I can hardly say I am glad to meet you, sir, for your coming here proves that you too come to live a life of outlawry, while some crime has doubtless driven you to seek refuge among men like yourself, branded by the law."

"I pity you, sir."

Lamar was struck by the words and manner of the woman, and hurt, too, for he saw that he reddened him aright—he was a villain, too.

And she?

He knew not what to think of her.

She was not to be read so easily.

"I am here," he said, "at the command of Don Diaz, who is my friend."

"I fear you may find his friendship as fatal as his enmity; but if you have chosen to walk the guilty path in life, I suppose there is no one to blame for it but yourself, though there may be others, many others to suffer by it."

"But as you are here, señor, you are welcome,

and the Lariat-Thrower will show you your quarters and doubtless make you feel at home."

"May I ask your name?"

"Lamar, señora."

"Lamar?"

The name broke in a startled cry from her lips, and both Lariat Lou and the lieutenant were alarmed at her manner.

She turned pale, very pale, and then her face crimsoned, to again become perfectly white, while one hand clutched at her throat as though she was choking.

She had stepped backward a couple of paces at the utterance of the name, but now, with an effort at control, as she saw that they observed her emotion, she advanced again and looked squarely into the face of the outlaw officer.

Then she essayed to speak, but at first the effort was a failure, and she could not articulate.

Then she spoke, but the rich tone of a moment before was gone.

"Did I hear aright, señor?"

"You said your name was Lamar?"

"Yes, señora," and the man's face flushed at the lie he told.

"Pardon me, but it is a name dear to me, from bygone associations, and— Are you from Texas?"

"Yes, I may say that I am, for I was a ranchero there."

"Was? That means before you—became a fugitive?"

Again his face reddened, for the woman did not mince matters with him.

He knew not what reply to make, so remained silent, and she asked, her voice now soft and low:

"Will you pardon me if I ask your full name, and more about you?"

"It is an interest aroused by the name you bear."

He hesitated and then said:

"My name is Leroy Lamar."

She started, and then stepping quickly toward him said, savagely:

"You lie! You have no claim to that name."

"You are not Leroy Lamar!"

"Go!"

He shrunk under her withering look.

Her eyes seemed to read his guilty, false heart, and though the lie flung in his teeth angered him, he made no reply, but turned away.

Then he wheeled about and said, angrily:

"I am an officer in this band, señora, and you must be careful how you sling the lie in my teeth, for I will have none of it."

"I defy you!"

He dared not disobey, for there was that in her look that would not tolerate it, and so he walked away, while Lariat Lou remarked:

"You and the Queen are going to have trouble, señor, my word on it."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE COWBOY'S RETURN.

WHEN Mexican Moses fell, under the shot of the Unknown, Texas Jack gave vent to his words of admiration, and stepping forward said, as he extended his hand:

"You must let me congratulate you, pard."

"You were right, as to allowing that fellow to go if he killed you, for a deader shot I never saw."

"Thank you, captain, and may I ask you to let your man bury the body and fall heir to what he may have of value about him?"

"Certainly; but you will remain to dinner, and—"

"No, I must be off, thank you, for I have work to do—oh! there comes one of your men now."

As the Unknown spoke he pointed to a man coming along the base of the ridge of timber.

He was walking slowly, and gazing intently toward the cabin.

"No, that is not one of my men, or he would be mounted."

"Perhaps some accident has happened to his horse, and—no, I recognize him, captain, as one of the Red Revolver Rangers."

The Unknown was starting toward him when Texas Jack called out:

"Hold, sir! I know him too, and he is one of my men."

The Unknown Steer Rider halted and calmly awaited the approach of the man.

He came in more rapidly now, as he seemed to recognize Texas Jack, who called out:

"Ho, Chestnut Charlie, I'm tickled to death to see you."

It was Chestnut Charlie pale, haggard and on foot.

Texas Jack sprang toward him and grasped his hand, and Chestnut Charlie said:

"Yes, Captain Jack, it's me, what are you doing here, and I'm back again without working the rattle went fer."

"It was a big job you undertook, Charlie; but where is Trapper Tim?"

"In the happy hunting grounds, Jack, poor fellow."

"Yes, poor fellow, peace to his ashes; but how was it, Chestnut Charlie?"

The latter gave a glance at the Masked Steer Rider who said quickly:

"Do you vouch for this man, Captain Omo-hundro?"

"With my life, sir."

"I must tell you that I have seen him, and the one he calls Trapper Tim, in the ranks of the Red Revolver Rangers—see, I have the names here of every man in the outlaw band," and the Unknown took from his pocket a small note-book in which were written a number of names.

"You have them down pat, sir, and Chestnut Charlie and Trapper Tim are there also; but you have crossed some off in red ink."

"Yes, sir, those who have departed this life by my hand," was the quiet reply, and he added:

"You will notice that before the names of some dozen of them there is a 'D'?"

"I observe it, sir."

"That stands for *Doomed*, for those men who have the D before their names are the ones who are my *especial* game, and there are six of them left and five have gone."

"The others of the band are my foes upon general principles, yet when I might be merciful to one of them I would not be to one who was marked *Doomed*."

"I see Mexican Moses's name here also."

"Yes, sir; but you vouch for this man, you say?"

"I do, Pard Unknown, for, though you say aright that he was one of the Red Revolver Rangers, he was there for a purpose and with my consent."

"Ah! and you failed in your purpose, sir?"

"Yes, I regrets I did, pard, and wuss still, I lost my pardner," said Chestnut Charlie, who then told his story of the capture of the chief by himself and Tim, and how they had been fired upon from ambush and Don Diaz was rescued while his comrade was killed.

"Yer see, pard, fer ef yer is Cap'n Jack's friend yer is mine, too, and I calls yer pard, yer see, we got it hot from close quarters."

"I were hit here in the arm, but not hurted much, and my horse were kilt, while Tim went down dead."

"I seen that, and I didn't know how many thar was along, and as ther Don spurred toward ther enemy o' me an Tim, I jist lighted onto my pard's horse and lit out."

"But ther horse he got it pretty hard too, and thet night he died, and it put me afoot."

"Then I footed it back to ther place ter reconnoiter, an' it broke my heart a'most ter find out I hed lit out from one man."

"Thar lay poor Tim, left fer coyotes, and I jist planted him decent as possible."

"But ther enemy and ther Don hed gone long before, yer see, and I disklivered thet thar were but one man in thet ambush; but he made me think it were half a dozen."

"I tuk his trail, Cap'n Jack, and I tell yer the truth, it leads right to this very spot I am standin' on."

Texas Jack started at this and asked, quickly:

"Do you mean that the track of the horse led here?"

"Yas, cap'n."

"Chestnut Charlie?"

"I hears yer, Pard Jack."

"The man who ambushed you was one I befriended."

"The boys picked him up— But will you keep a secret?"

"I will, pard, jist as close as ef it were cofined."

"You, sir, I will also ask not to speak of what I am going to tell you?"

And Texas Jack turned to the Wild Steer Rider, who replied, promptly:

"Any confidence you place in me, sir, I will not betray, you may feel assured."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TERRORS TAKE THE TRAIL.

"LET me explain what I would tell you, by saying," began Texas Jack, "that something over a year ago I met here a gentleman and his daughter, who had come from their home in the North, to attend the trial of a man who was imprisoned in San Antonio for a cold-blooded murder."

"The prisoner was the son of the one, the brother of the other, and he was a cattleman up on the border, and a wild, reckless scapegrace, whose father had done all in his power to save him from ruin."

"He came here to try and save the young man from the gallows, but before the arrival of himself and daughter, the prisoner killed the jailer and escaped."

"There was a reward at once offered for him, and he became known as the Fugitive Ranchero."

"I met his father and sister, and was more than pleased with them, and it seems that they met with an accident while going to young Fontaine's ranch, for they were ambushed, their guides shot, and but for the pluck of a young man, who was the head cowboy on the Fontaine Ranch, they would have been captured, perhaps killed."

"This young man was an educated fellow, I have heard, and even though the school was so pleased with him that he urged him to give up his cowboy life and go North, and ac-

cept a place with him, and he did so, and he is North now, while Colonel Fontaine, who has been unfortunate in business, is now on his way, with his daughter, to take possession of his son's ranch and live there, for, as you know, Unknown Pard, it is his train that the Red Revolver Rangers attacked?

"Well, to make my story short, it was believed that the escaped prisoner was perhaps dead; but the other day he was found by my Rangers, on a wretched horse, with a revolver only, sick and half-starved.

"He was recognized by Buck Taylor, and Buckskin Sam, although he said that his name was Leroy Lamar.

"They brought him here, but as one of the boys had told me of his capture, and I did not wish to have him taken back to San Antonio and hanged, just as his father and sister had come to Texas, for their sake I called him Leroy Lamar, and the boys were satisfied of their mistake and let him go; but some time soon, when I sell off some cattle, I'll give the boys the amount of the reward offered for him, to divvy among them, as they deserve it.

"I really disliked the fellow, yet for the sake of his father and sister, fitted him out with a repeating rifle, a belt of arms, good horse, saddle and bridle, and provisions, and started him on the trail to Mexico, where he could be beyond pursuit.

"But, somehow, I doubted him, and had half an idea that he was going to join the Red Revolver Rangers, for he told me that he had met Don Diaz, though he did not know at the time he was an outlaw chief, and felt sure he would never be taken prisoner.

"Now, Chestnut Charlie, what you tell me of him, proves that he has leagued himself with the Red Rangers, for, as you followed the trail of his horse to my cabin, it could be none other than this man Fontaine."

"What a sad thing it would be, Captain Omohundro, if he was discovered by his father and sister among the Red Revolver Rangers, should they attack the train."

"It would, indeed, sir; but should he know they were there, he would doubtless prevent the Don from attacking the train, and he certainly must have influence with him, as he saved him from Chestnut Charlie's grip."

"True, sir; but may I ask you, Chestnut Charlie, if you recognize that body lying yonder?"

The Steer Rider pointed to the body of Mexican Moses, which, as he had had his back to it was not before seen by him.

He stepped toward it and called out excitedly:

"Mexican Moses, or I'm a liar, and his toes turned up for keeps.

"Who did this hear pleasin' and pious duty, Cap'n Jack?"

Jack laughed at the way Chestnut Charlie put it, and answered:

"My Unknown Pard there."

"Yer Unknown Pard are a brick.

"Put it thar, sir, and accept ther thanks o' Chestnut Charlie, fer he were ther durnedest gerloot o' Satan in ther hull outfit, and that are sayin' a heap.

"How were it, pard?"

"A challenge from a man whom I meant some day to kill, for he was marked D on my list," was the reply, and then he added:

"Now, captain, I must bid you farewell, for, as I said, I have work I cannot neglect.

"But for that I would have escorted the Fontaine train to its destination.

"I am glad, Chestnut Charlie, to know that you are not a Red Revolver Ranger, and I shall scratch you from the list."

He bowed in his courtly way, and calling to his white steer to approach, he mounted and rode away, followed by the herd of half a hundred.

Chestnut Charlie gazed after him for awhile and then said:

"Pard Jack, thar's heaps o' man in ther Steer Rider."

"There is, indeed, Charlie, and it would have done you good to see him kill Mexican Moses.

"He was so quick the man was dead before I thought he had time to level his revolver, and he hit him squarely between the eyes, as you see."

"Who are he, Pard Jack?"

"I do not know."

"You does not, or yer does not want to tell?"

"I do not know, nor can I guess."

"You know there was an old man with long gray beard and hair who used to ride steers and be known as the Mad Hermit?"

"I remembers him, and he were red lightning on ther trail o' ther ornery outfit I has been with, for he kilt more than half a dozen in his time; but whar is he?"

"No one has seen him of late, but this man rides in his stead, and controls the Demon Herd.

"He came here some time ago, splendidly mounted, but masked as you saw him, and so thoroughly that, wearing gloves as he does, no one can even tell his color.

"He told me he wished to call on me some time for help, in his hunt for the Red Revolver

Rangers, and I was only too glad to promise to aid him, and he came to-day with Mexican Moses a prisoner, and Coon signaled for the boys, for we take the trail to guard the Fontaine train, which Prairie Pilot is now guide for."

"Yas, we, Tim and me, put up ther job ter let Pilot go, and he got thar I is glad ter hear; but I must git rested ter go with yer, cap'n."

"No, you are worn out, Charlie, and can stay here with Coon."

"Pard Cap'n, I hain't ther man ter hang fire when thar is work ter be did."

"No, I goes, and thar comes Buckskin Sam and Boy Buck now, and I leaves it to you to tell 'em me and Tim warn't ther wicked tellers they thought we was."

"I'll gladly tell them," was Texas Jack's reply, and when Buckskin Sam and Boy Buck rode up he kept his word, as he did to make known to all the others on their arrival.

In three hours and a half after Coon had lighted the urgent signal-fire, the last of the Cowboy Rangers had arrived at the ranch of Texas Jack, and having rested for a short while the dashing riders started upon the trail, headed by their captain, while Chestnut Charlie, rested, well mounted and armed, would not be left behind when there was work to be done.

"I wants ter rub off thet outlaw stain, pards," he said, and added softly:

"And avenge poor Tim, too."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TERRORS SET A TRAP.

FORTUNATELY for both Adèle Fontaine and Bessie Langley, they possessed natures to rise above the ills of life, and instead of cowering with fear at the dangers through which they had passed, and were yet to be faced, they had the nerve to meet all that was before them.

There was much to be dreaded, for both the Masked Steer Rider and the Prairie Pilot had said that they were not yet done with the Red Revolver Rangers, and though the former had gone for aid, would that aid arrive before the outlaws? was the question in the hearts of all in the train.

Prairie Pilot fully realized that if the train was captured his doom was certain, but he was not the man to shrink from duty.

He called Colonel Fontaine and Mr. Langley one side, and they discussed the affair as it was, and then he decided to take another trail, where certainly the camping-places could be chosen, so as not to be upon the open prairie, as would be the case did they follow the regular way.

If they had a camp capable of standing off the outlaws in an attack, they could hold them at bay until the coming of Texas Jack and his Terrors.

So the train pulled out from the camp where it had halted, to allow search for the two girls, and went on its way westward.

The stop had rested the cattle, and they moved on more rapidly than before, and made a camp twenty miles from where they had left in the morning.

The next day was Sunday, and by common consent the emigrants always took the Sabbath for a rest.

This gave Prairie Pilot a chance to go on a scout.

He knew the country perfectly, and he was fully aware of just where the road-agents would go to ambush the train.

But he made a wide circuit and saw no signs of them.

It was just dark when he returned to camp and all felt cheered by his report, and in better spirits pulled out the next morning, for some of the people were becoming heartily sick of the peril and hardships, not to speak of the suspense which they had to suffer.

During Monday afternoon, an hour after the noonday halt of a couple of hours, the Prairie Pilot suddenly glanced behind, as they ascended a rise of the prairie.

Instantly he gave the order to hurry on, and the train was soon in rapid motion, the straggling cattle driven up close, and the wagons that were lagging back brought up.

"What is it, Pilot?" asked Colonel Fontaine.

"They may be all right, sir, but they also may not be, and it's best to be on the safe side and reach yonder hill."

"There's water there, grass, and more, we can make a fight of it."

"But what is the danger?"

"I saw a number of horsemen coming, but they are too far off to tell if they are friends or foes."

"You are right to be on the safe side then, Prairie Pilot," and the colonel, at the guide's request, then rode on ahead to the hill, from whence he could see, with his glass, just what the horsemen were.

He ascended the hill, and quickly selected a camping-place.

Then he turned his glass back over the trail. Miles away he saw a body of horsemen, but they were too far distant to tell whether they were soldiers, Texas Jack's Terrors, or the Red Revolver Rangers.

So the colonel took his ax, and at once began to fell several trees that were growing in an

advantageous place to form a breastwork, and as there were half a dozen men from the train that just then came up, they also went to work with a will.

When the train arrived an hour after, they found the camp all located, and the wagons were quickly placed in position and the cattle driven into the corral for them.

A stream was near, and the breastworks thrown up so hastily formed a fair shelter.

As the horsemen had not come in sight, it was supposed that they could be no other than the Red Revolver Rangers, who were waiting for night to come on, for when seen they certainly were following the trail of the train.

"Ah, there comes some one," cried Adèle, and she attracted the attention of Prairie Pilot to a hilltop where a horseman was visible.

He came on at a lope, and the moment that the guide caught sight of him he cried:

"Texas Jack it is!"

A cheer broke from all in the train, and every eye was upon the horseman as he came on toward the embankment.

He was alone, but all knew the scout so well by reputation they felt that he was at a giant in their defense.

"But who were the horsemen we saw?" said the colonel.

This Prairie Pilot gave up, but replied:

"Texas Jack is between them and us, and he will know, colonel, my word for it."

As the Cowboy Captain came on it was noticed that he was mounted upon a superb young horse that seemed not to feel his weight or to be tired from his journey, for he arched his neck and came on at an easy, graceful canter.

The scout's bridle, saddle and trappings were Mexican and sparkled with silver, and hisat his horse like the splendid rider he was.

His spurs jingled musically as he came on, and he was dressed in buckskin leggings stuck in his boot-tops, an embroidered hunting-shirt, beneath the collar of which was knotted a black-silk scarf.

His broad-brimmed sombrero was gold-embroidered and encircled by a miniature lariat, while a gold star with a diamond in each of the five points and a ruby in the center held the brim of his hat up on the left side.

His handsome, cherry face had a smile on it as he came up and threw himself from the saddle, doffing his hat as he did so and grasping the hand of Prairie Pilot in a way that showed his pleasure at again meeting him, while he said:

"Well, old pard, I am happy to see you again."

"And I to see you, Captain Jack, for matters have looked bad for me since we parted."

Texas Jack then advanced toward the colonel and Adèle and warmly greeted them, and was introduced to Mr. Langley, Bessie and the rest of the train people.

"But who are the mounted men on our trail, Captain Jack, for you know, I am sure, and they made us hustle on here to make a fort," said Prairie Pilot.

"Ah! you have seen them then?"

"You bet we have, and they made us hump along."

Jack laughed and replied:

"You have keen eyes, for I halted them awaback out of sight, fearing I might give you all a scare, and came on alone."

"They are the Terrors, and when they come on I wish to hide them in the train, for I intend to give the Red Revolver Rangers a surprise-party they will not soon forget."

This explanation of who were on their trail was a great relief to all, and an hour after the Cowboy Rangers came up and, dismounting, were given two wagons to ride in, thus hiding their presence with the train when it once more pulled out on the trail; and thus had the Terrors set a trap for the Red Revolver Rangers.

CHAPTER XL.

CAUSE FOR ALARM.

WHEN Don Diaz started a second time upon the trail of the emigrant train he was determined to have no mistake.

So he picked his men and horses and armed all the outlaws with an extra weapon, this time a rifle.

It was the first time that the Red Revolver Rangers had ever carried a rifle, but they did so now against a foe they had good reason to dread.

This foe was the Steer Rider and his Demon Herd.

If they would appear again to thwart them, Don Diaz meant to have his men meet them with shots at long range, and he did not doubt but what he could check their advance.

There must be no mistake this time, he was determined.

Don Diaz was a man to prepare for emergencies at all times, and knowing the value of red-skin friendship when needed, he had sought out the Indian chiefs and made them his allies.

There was not a month that he did not send them presents of blankets, arms, ammunition and other things to gladden the eye of the red-skin, and in this way he had won them over as his friends.

He had let them know that he was at war with the soldiers and the settlers, and thus had gained their confidence.

So it was that when he started on his raid against the train he was determined to let there be no failure, and he sent a trusty messenger to the village of the Indian chief, Red Snake, asking him to meet him at a certain place with fifty warriors.

The messenger reached the Indian village and found that Red Snake was there, but most of his braves were away on a hunt to the northward; but the Indian chief did not wish to refuse the request of so good a friend as Don Diaz had been, so he told the messenger to return and say that he would send for his warriors and be there, and he at once dispatched runners in search of the hunting-party.

When the messenger returned and reported what was the result of his errand, Don Diaz fretted at the delay it would occasion, and was almost tempted to strike the train without the support of the red-skins.

But he concluded to wait a day and night for them, and then, if they did not appear, to ambush the train.

He knew that his men outnumbered the fighters among the emigrants, or at least were equal to them; but then the trainmen fought on their own ground, so to speak, and had the advantage of their wagons as breastworks, while the women could load their weapons for them.

But with a surprise upon them, Don Diaz was sure it would be as good as half the battle to begin with.

Mexican Moses, he hoped, was still with the train, but he could not understand why the messenger horse had not been sent to him.

One day he lay in wait and watched the train pass within half a mile of him.

He had a good glass and eyed it closely and searchingly.

"They have more animals than Moses reported," he muttered, counting the horses.

Suddenly a man rode out from behind a wagon and moved to the front.

"Ah! that is Mexican Moses, for I would know that claybank horse among a thousand," he muttered.

"But why does he not send me a message, I wonder?"

"I guess they watch him too closely."

"But then, the messenger horse would go straight to the camp, and I would not get it, as the men have moved away to the Mexican retreat."

"Yet we might catch the horse, though Moses does not know we are about, I suppose."

"Yes, there is Miss Fontaine, and there is a young girl with her—the one Mexican Moses wrote me of, I guess, and whose name is Langley."

So the man mused as he lay in hiding, viewing the train through his glass as it wound slowly by.

That evening Prairie Pilot went into camp early, for he knew that there was not another good halting-place within a dozen miles.

And the place where he halted was not where he wished to camp, for it was hardly a good situation to defend.

But a wagon had broken down, and the delay in repairing it had thrown him back half a day, as he had had in mind a camping-spot twenty miles beyond that was impregnable.

It was there, too, he had expected the road-agents would lie in wait for the train.

But the guide did the best that there was to do under the circumstances, and the encampment was formed, and every preparation made against attack.

It was a scant timber motte, where there were several springs and just a slight rise of ground.

The cattle were kept upon the prairie feeding until dark and then driven into the corral prepared for them.

Guards were set and Prairie Pilot himself went on a scout around the camp.

"They are watching us, I feel sure, and that is why I asked Buckskin Sam to play off as Mexican Moses the past day or so, colonel," said the guide.

"You wished them to think their man was still along?"

"Yes, sir, although he has gone to feed fires down yonder, as Texas Jack told us."

"But I am sorry we broke down, for I'd like to have reached the Rock Hill to camp, as this is not a good place for us, for you see the rise of the prairie all around would let them get up to within a few hundred yards of us by day even, before we saw them."

"I confess I am ticklish to-night, colonel, so we'll be careful, and I don't go to my blanket until the sun rises, and then I'll take a nap in the ambulance; but here's Jack, and we'll see what he says."

Texas Jack then approached, and with Prairie Pilot regretted that the train had not reached a better camping-place.

"The truth is, colonel," he said, "although we are here to help you, I feel with the guide rather skittish, and I'll tell you why."

"Pilot went on a scout day before yesterday,

you know, and he saw a horseman pass near, but out of range."

"He knew him as one he had seen in the outlaw camp, and he was on a trail that could lead him to but one place, and that is to the Indian village of Red Snake."

"Now Don Diaz is friendly with the red-skins, and this man was going to the Comanche village we are certain, to get aid from them, for why else was he going in that direction?"

"If we are right in our surmise, Red Snake will have reached Don Diaz to-day, and finding us camped here, and we could do nothing else, they will be likely to attack us to-night, for on the trail ahead we have not another camping-place that is not a good one."

"Now, sir, please let all your men know this, but no one else, and I will, with my Rangers, sleep on the line around the camp, so as to be at our posts."

Fully realizing now the reason of Prairie Pilot's anxiety, Colonel Fontaine sought his men and prepared them for the worst, and every one slept with his arms in his hands, so as to be ready for a surprise should it come.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE FIRST BLOW.

HAVING kept himself posted of the movements of the train, Don Diaz saw them go into the exposed camp with a feeling of anger against Red Snake, that he was not present with his warriors to help him.

"There would be no escape for them, if we could attack them there at dawn, for we could wholly surround them, and the red-skins could prevent one of them from getting away."

"It would be a clean sweep," said Don Diaz to one of his men.

The more he thought over the situation, the more he grew anxious to attack and not wait for the red-skins' coming.

"To-morrow night they will reach Rock Hill, and then a regiment could not take the train," he muttered.

At last he sent a messenger to ride toward the Indian camp, with orders to return after an hour's ride, if he did not meet Red Snake and his braves.

If he did meet them, to hurry back with all speed.

It was after midnight before the messenger returned, and he reported seeing nothing of the Indians.

"I shall attack at dawn and not wait for them."

"I can carry the camp against the force they have," he said, and telling the guard to call him an hour before dawn, he wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down to sleep.

And sleep he did, in spite of the crimes upon his conscience.

The guard called him punctually, and the men were aroused, ate a cold snack and then saddled their horses.

Every man was called before him then, and Don Diaz said:

"Men, old Red Snake has not arrived, so I shall attack without him."

"We will never get the train in a more exposed camp than it now is, and we outnumber the defenders."

"I wish ten of you to surround the camp, and with the others I will charge, and you lay close in as we reach the train."

"Kill men, but no women or children, but only men when you have to, as all will pay for their lives."

"Do you understand?"

A murmur ran down the line, and then the chief mounted and led the men toward the camp, a mile away.

The ten men selected to surround the encampment went away to obey their orders, and the chief gave them ample time to get into position.

Then he moved slowly forward and halted.

The horses were made to lie down, and the men crouched by them, to await dawn, for Don Diaz wished to see what he was about, and he knew if awake the camp would be off its guard when they saw day breaking and no attack.

At last the gray of dawn broke over the prairie, and then came the stern order:

"Mount, men, and follow me!"

The outlaws sprung to their feet, the horses also leaped up, and mounting they set off at a gallop for the encampment, not two hundred yards away.

They charged with wild yells, and from the ten men around the camp the cries were answered.

But, suddenly, out from the circle of wagons came a line of flame, and over a score of rifles flashed, while bullets found human targets.

It was a staggering blow, so well aimed, and more than the Don and his men had expected.

Men and horses had fallen here and there, and the outlaw line wilted under the withering fire.

But Don Diaz was not to be beaten off at once, and though surprised he called to the men to close up and follow him, while he shouted in a voice that the other men heard that had surrounded the camp:

"Close in on them, Red Revolvers!"

But again came a fire from the train that staggered the outlaws, forcing the chief to call out:

"Men, those are Texans yonder, for that fire is not from tenderfeet."

"But crush them!"

Again the men rallied at the call of their chief to receive another volley that sent horses and outlaws in a heap.

The chief's horse also was killed, but he was unhurt and sprung to his feet, seized the horse of one of his men who had been less fortunate than himself, and springing into the saddle sought to lead his men once more to the charge.

But wild, weird and appalling rung out the war-cry of Texas Jack and his Terrors, and the Red Revolver Rangers broke and fled.

"Mount, men, and we'll drive them to their den!" cried Texas Jack.

But loud rung the cry:

"Hold, pard! see thar!"

It was Chestnut Charlie who uttered the cry, and he pointed to a rise of the prairie some distance off.

"Comanches! remain in camp, boys," said Texas Jack, as his eyes fell upon half a hundred Comanche warriors.

They were coming over the rise at a run and with yells that were fearful to hear.

"We're in for it, pards, for I guess old Red Snake has got his entire band," Texas Jack said, quietly.

"You may bet he hain't come without 'em, and we is in fer a siege, like rats in a hole," Chestnut Charlie responded.

The encircling line of outlaws had now fallen back out of range, but took up a position not far away and in full sight.

In front, where the Don had charged, half a dozen horses lay dead, and as many men had fallen, either dead or wounded.

The Don and his other men had however fallen back to the rise, and there they awaited the coming of the red-skins.

"Stand ready, Rangers, for they will come at once."

"All keep your eyes open and upon every side, for we have got big odds against us in sight, and I fear more are behind them."

"Look out! they are coming!"

And Texas Jack's voice rung out loud and firm.

The colonel had command of the trainmen and every one was at his post, while the women were sheltered and grouped together loading weapons which the boys ran to and fro with to the line of defenders.

Fully three-score red-skins were in sight and one-third as many Red Revolver Rangers, while the force of the train and the Terrors were a little under a third as many.

But they dreaded that Red Snake had more behind them out of sight.

"Ready, all! aim for a breast and pull trigger to kill!" cried Texas Jack, and a cheer answered him.

On came the combined force of outlaws and Indians in two columns, with a score of braves following the Red Revolver chief, for Red Snake had sent them to him.

The yells of the outlaws and the war-cries of the Comanches were fearful to hear, but the brave defenders of the train never flinched, not a man wavered, and the cool pluck of the Cowboy Rangers inspired the emigrants with courage and hope.

On they came with a rush, seeming irresistible, and Texas Jack's cheery face looked clouded, for he was forced to dread the result.

But suddenly a wild yell broke from Prairie Pilot that told there was something to occur which his keen eyes alone had discerned.

CHAPTER XLII.

SWEPT AWAY.

THE cry of Prairie Pilot not only startled the train people, but also the Texas Terrors, who were so well accustomed to surprises.

They knew that the guide was not a man to get excited, but certainly he was so now.

He realized, as did Texas Jack, how desperate were the chances against the force now rushing upon them, while he was assured that Red Snake must have more warriors in the background as a reserve.

Red Snake, the Comanche, was not the man to venture from his mountain retreat without a large force, they knew, especially as there was war between him and the whites at the time.

But they were not aware that the Red Revolver chief had only asked for a small force.

Still, when his hunters came in, the Comanche had decided to take ten more warriors over the fifty asked for.

He had been delayed, by his messenger finding the hunters, and had ridden hard to join Don Diaz, well knowing there was plunder to gain.

So his braves and their ponies were really used up.

Still they heard the attack of Don Diaz and urged on their horses, arriving at the scene just as the outlaws were beaten back.

A hasty conference with Red Snake decided

Don Diaz in at once renewing the charge, and it was done, though the red-skins and their ponies were in no condition for a fight.

Still they went upon the charge looking for an easy victory, as Don Diaz had been most particular not to tell the chief that Texas Jack and his Terrors were aiding in the defense of the train.

"We owe it to that devil, the Wild Steer Rider, that they are there," said the chief of the Red Revolver Rangers, to one of his men, and he added:

"Yes, he has gone after those Cowboys, and that marks him for my special prey if we are beaten off."

But he kept very quiet about the Texans being present to the red-skins, or else Red Snake and his warriors would have been most cautious and would have wanted him to reconnoiter and plan.

So on they rushed, and when they were almost in range and all looked very gloomy for the train people, there arose the startling yell of Prairie Pilot, followed by the words:

"Look there, pards!"

Over the heads of the charging foes a dark mass was visible, some hundreds of yards behind them.

At first all believed that it was another force of red-skins, the reserve coming on, for coming on they were and right behind the enemy.

But no, there seemed to be but one rider, and he led the moving mass.

Just as the order was given to be ready to fire, while it was upon the lips of Texas Jack, and he had held back to the last minute to make it deadly, a shot rung out sharp and clear, and then others in rapid succession.

But they came not from the defenders of the train, but from the night-rider in the rear of the outlaws and Indians.

"The Wild Steer Rider!" was heard in the deep voice of Colonel Fontaine.

"The Demon Herd!" came from the lips of one of the cowboys.

"We are saved," cried Adèle Fontaine, who heard the cries and knew the desperate situation the train was in, for her father had told her the worst must be expected.

The ringing shots from behind them caused outlaws and red-skins to look around.

Then too those shots told, every one of them on either horse or rider.

With yells the outlaws and red-skins saw their danger, and it was appalling.

Not caring to deal with the Demon Herd, Don Diaz had left his rifles and extra baggage under a guard on the prairie, and the red-skins had laid aside their extra accoutrements, which were looked after by several of their braves.

And over these, like an avalanche the Demon Herd had swept, and now all saw that the Mysterious Steer Rider was out in full form.

There were not less than three hundred wild, fierce steers in the herd he had brought, and they were coming on like the wind.

Mounted upon his black steer, just in a line with the front animals of the herd was the Masked Rider.

He had stuck the end of his lance down into his boot-leg, so that the sharp end was atop and then waved the red streamers to guide his wild steers.

A blast came upon his bugle, following his unerring shots, and instantly, resounding like thunder came the bellowing of hundreds of cattle, which, mingled with their hoof-treads and wild snorts, was enough to spread terror in the ranks of the bravest men.

The outlaws and the red-skins were fairly caught, and out rung the well-known and fierce cry of the Terrors of Texas Jack, which told the Comanches who it was that they had to fight.

And worse still the Cowboy Rangers opened fire, and their deadly aim emptied saddles and brought down horses.

Don Diaz was in despair, yet he still rushed on for the train.

"Cowards! it is but one man and the train will divide the cattle."

"Follow me!"

His men feared him, but the mass of clicking horns and bellowing cattle behind them was more appalling, and as the train people opened savagely and with deadly aim, the red-skins broke in confusion.

They saw Red Snake, their chief, fall under the fire of the Masked Rider, who was heading his black steer directly for him.

Then it became a wild stampede, for their tired horses were frantic with terror, and wavering to the left the mass rushed by the train, outlaws and Indians mixed together in confusion, and with faces in which there was terror untold.

The Terrors rushed out and poured a fire upon them, and yelled like demons, which yells the train people echoed, and for a moment it was appalling to hear.

And on past the camp swept the surging, bellowing mass of cattle, their horns clicking together like the rattle of distant musketry, and the earth fairly shaking under their mad rush in chase of the Comanches and Red Revolver Rangers, who had been literally swept away.

CHAPTER XLIII. PURSUED AND PURSUER.

THE Wild Steer Rider had a second time saved the train.

There was no denying the fact, and more, Texas Jack and his Terrors felt that they owed him their lives also.

A few might have escaped, but it was doubtful.

The position was a bad one to defend, and in the desperate struggle which would have followed the breaking in of the line of defenders, the carnage would have been terrible, and there was no one who believed they could have beaten off the charging outlaws and red-skins.

As it was, the Red Revolver Rangers had reserved their fire for close quarters, and the red-skins were mostly armed with bows, arrows and lances, so that the carnage which would have followed their fire was prevented by the unlooked-for and timely appearance of the Wild Steer Rider and his Demon Herd.

As it was, a Cowboy Ranger had been killed, several more wounded more or less slightly, and Colonel Fontaine and three of the emigrants had wounds that were not serious as mementoes of the battle.

There were some horses and cattle killed in the train, and a negro woman had an arrow in her arm, and this was what the train had suffered.

On the other hand fully two dozen horses lay dead in front of the camp, and four outlaws, with twice as many Indians, but the wounded had been borne off, and Texas Jack said that they were not a few.

On had swept the outlaws and red-skins, now in full flight, and hot on their trail had rushed the Wild Steer Rider and his Demon Herd.

They had gone down a slope that led to the foot-hills miles away and they dared not halt to fight back a foe which killing did not check.

Don Diaz and his men were well mounted and their horses were comparatively fresh, so they kept on in the lead, yet they dared not push on and leave the Comanches, or they would make them their lasting foes.

So the Don checked his men, who, in their terror, would have rushed on, and, to show them that he meant what he said when he ordered them to keep back, he sent a bullet through the brain of one man who would not heed.

This summary act got the others at once under control.

The Don was livid with rage, for in the moment of victory, it seemed, he had been thwarted.

And there came his foe behind him.

His foe, for he was yet but one man, and still had the power of a regiment in his dumb brutes.

The Don wanted that man's scalp, and as he rode on he was plotting to get it.

The Masked Rider was but a hundred yards behind the Indians, not gaining, not losing ground.

He was out of range of the outlaws' revolvers, and Don Diaz cursed himself for not having armed his men with rifles.

He was beyond the reach of an Indian arrow, and so perfectly safe.

His herd was very compact and coming on at full speed, it seemed.

On one side of the black steer ridden by the Wild Rider was the large white one, Snow, and upon the other was Red-skin, which Mexican Moses had ridden to his death at the ranch of Texas Jack.

The lance was held erect, as before, and across his left arm was carried the fatal repeating-rifle.

How far would it carry? was the question which disturbed the Don.

Red Snake had been killed and left on the prairie near the camp, so the Don felt that he could not depend upon the Indians.

His own force had been lessened and were demoralized, so it looked to him, no matter which way he regarded it, that the train was safe.

It was guarded by Texas Jack and his Terrors, and would doubtless be to its destination.

So the Don looked for revenge upon the one who had prevented his plot from being carried to success.

That man was now alone and coming fearlessly on behind him.

"Men, when I reach the hills I will drop back and kill that man."

"You go on and wait for me at the rendezvous we last left," he said.

"And the red-skins?"

"They will return to their camps, unless Romio, the next chief, wishes to go after several hundred warriors and return and avenge Red Snake."

This idea seemed to strike Don Diaz as a good one, and he dropped back to have a talk with Romio.

But that chief had not the friendship for the Don that Red Snake had, and said he would go back to his people and strike a blow of revenge when he felt like it.

As though to encourage him in this idea, there came a sharp report from the rear, and a bullet split his left ear.

The chief gave a yell, and it was echoed by his braves, and the ponies were belabored cruelly to urge them on.

"He is coming," shouted an outlaw, and all saw that he spoke the truth.

The Wild Steer Rider had not put his Demon Herd to full speed, for now, as the fugitives neared the hills, they increased their pace into a run that caused them to gain rapidly upon them.

Glancing over his shoulder, Don Diaz saw the lance waving over the heads of the steers, and he knew that it was every man then for himself and the herd catch the hindmost, so he put spurs to his horse and sought safety in flight.

The Don, his Red Rangers and his red allies were stampeded.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE DEMON HERD.

FOR the first time in his life Don Diaz felt something come over him that he could not understand.

It seemed to choke him, as he fled along before the Demon Pursuers, and there crept about his heart a sensation as though it was growing cold.

All his life he had never known what it was to feel absolute fear.

Now the feeling upon him caused him to grow nervous, and he hissed forth:

"My God! is this fear?"

"And fear of what?"

"Do I, who have seen so many die, who have sent so many souls into eternity, fear to die?"

"By Heaven, but I do! I am all unnerved."

And once more he turned in his saddle and looked behind him.

He saw in the blanched faces of his men that what they felt he did also.

The Indians were flying as they would not have fled from human foes.

It was a flight from wild beasts, with one man to lead them on, and one man who did lead them like bloodhounds on the trail.

As Don Diaz looked back an Indian pony fell, and the rider sprung up to fly for his life.

Vain the hope, for the horn bayonets of the leading steers were upon him and he was torn and mangled by them to be the next second trampled into a shapeless mass of humanity under hundreds of hoofs.

And still that Wild Rider came on, upright in his saddle, silent, yet resolute.

He gave no cry, only governed his Demon Herd by a waving of his long lance with its scarlet ribbons.

His face was masked, and the face beneath that mask of wire Don Diaz would have given much to see.

Nearer and nearer came the herd, gaining as they drew closer to the timbered and canyon-pierced hills.

The Don no longer held back, but let his horse have the rein, and his fleet animal was leading now.

His men were close behind him, a few dropping back as their horses showed less speed and endurance.

The tired horses of the red-skins were wild with terror, and their dusky riders urged them on to escape that pointed wall of horns rushing upon them.

A bound more and Don Diaz entered the timber and dashed up two hills, his men close upon the heels of his horse.

Then suddenly the old spirit of daring swept over him and he sought to rally his men.

"Hold, men! right about and follow me upon a charge against them!"

He might as well have talked to the wind, for they went by him like a flash.

The red-skins scattered in all directions as they reached the wooded hills, and though a few partly hesitated, as though for a stand, they looked back to see the Demon Herd and sped on.

A moment more and the mass of steers would have plunged into the timber; but clear, ringing, and musical came the notes from the bugle carried by the Masked Unknown and the line came to a rapid halt.

They were in line like a cavalry regiment, as I stood panting after this hard run of miles.

The rider sprang from the back of his black steer and quickly threw his saddle and harness upon the white one, for he had a bridle on already.

Then he mounted, and leaving the herd where they had halted rode forward and gazed into the timber as though to see his foes.

They had gone on, and, returning he again sounded his bugle and trotted back on the trail he had come.

On he went at a slow pace past a dead Indian here, a fallen horse there, and yet not seeming to see them.

Presently he drew rein, for a party of horsemen appeared in front of him.

They were Texas Jack and his Terrors coming along the trail at a run.

They gave a cheer as they beheld the Wild Rider and his Demon Herd and a moment after dashed up, but with some misgivings as they glanced at the large number of splendid cattle,

"Well, my Unknown Pard, Texas Jack and his Rangers are yours for life.

"You did alone what we could not do, and in the name of all I thank you, and would say we were on the way to see if you needed aid."

"Not with my herd at my back, Captain Omohundro, for they are, like your men, terrors, and woe to all who would bar their way in a death-rush, for a regiment of cavalry firing on them could not stop them."

"You have them trained like soldiers, sir."

"It is well that I have, for dread of me lies in my cattle, and to them, not to me, is due the flight of the outlaws and Indians."

"You are modest, indeed; but where did you leave them?"

"At the base of the timber, for they would have me at a disadvantage there."

"But they are stampeded."

"The worst kind of a stampede, too, and my word for it they will not return."

"No; for the red-skins turned toward their village, and I do not believe two of the Red Revolver Rangers are together."

"They will not attack the train, I feel certain; but I hope you will guard it to its destination."

"Oh, yes; but you?"

"Must return."

"Where?"

"To my den."

"I do not wish to seem rude, nor is it from idle curiosity I ask, but who are you?"

"Your Unknown Pard," was the quiet response.

"You will not tell me more?"

"No; but did you see the fugitive Ranchero among the outlaws?"

"I did not; but did you?"

"No, he was not there, for I looked well for him."

"You know him then?"

"Yes."

"Well, my Unknown Pard, some day I hope I will know you better, but now I will go on with my men for a run through the hills yonder, for with you between the enemy and the train there is no danger."

"I am not going to the train."

"You will surely go by the camp?"

"No, for I must hasten to my den; but if you will not go far into the hills, only to see that the Indians and outlaws are really gone, I will give my cattle a couple of hours' rest until you return."

"Thank you; but will you not go too?"

"If you wish, but I will only take a few of my cattle."

He called to a dozen of the steers, and they trotted up to him, and at a wave of his lance fell in behind the cowboys.

Then he rode alongside of Texas Jack, who remarked:

"I believe your steer is almost as fleet as a horse."

"I am sure, Captain Omohundro, that the black, and the red one, now back with the herd, and Snow here, can outrun any horse on the prairies, and when it comes to bottom they can break them down."

"And they ride well too?"

"Oh, yes, this gait is as easy as a pace, and going fast they run evenly."

"Are there many that you can ride?"

"I have ridden a dozen or more, but the black, the red, and this one are the fleetest and best, and the others of the herd know them as leaders."

"And they are trained to your voice?"

"Yes, and my bugle and lance—see here!"

He raised his lance above his head as he spoke and the steers in the rear came to an instant halt.

He gave a call and they came trotting on once more.

They had now reached the hills, and the scouts scattered through them to reconnoiter, and after an hour to return to the point where they parted.

The steers were left there and Texas Jack went with the Wild Rider; but in an hour's time all returned, reporting that the Indians were closing their scattered force and heading for their village, riding on at a rapid gait, while the outlaws were still apart, trails leading in parties of two and three toward the Rio Grande.

Back then the scouts rode, and when they came to the Demon Herd, the Unknown bade Texas Jack and his men good-by, and declining to go by the train encampment, set off toward the northward.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE RUNAWAY.

BACK to the train went Texas Jack and his men.

He found that the dead had been buried, even to the bodies of the red-skins and outlaws, for, though foes, the emigrants felt that they were human, and in death claimed at least decent burial at their hands.

Mr. Langley, who had graduated as a doctor, but gave up his practise for farming, had skillfully attended to the wounded, and pronounced none of them dangerously hurt.

Having had a lesson as to their camping-place being an unsafe one, the emigrants were anxious to reach one where they could defend themselves better if attacked, and so they were glad to take advice of Prairie Pilot and move on.

They had pulled out and gone a couple of miles on the trail, when Texas Jack and his Rangers overhauled them, and Prairie Pilot had taken a southerly trail from that point.

"Where is the Unknown Rider, Captain Omohundro?" asked Adèle, as the Cowboy Rangers dashed up.

"We met him coming back, Miss Fontaine, having stampeded the whole outfit of lojun and outlaw, and he went with us on a short scout; but we couldn't find a Red Ranger or a red-skin, except several the Demon Herd had run over and used as a ball on their horns, they looked like."

"And the Wild Rider, where is he, Captain Omohundro?" again asked the maiden, while Bessie said:

"Yes, never mind the outlaws and Indians, but tell us where the Unknown is, and why he did not return to camp with you?"

"I urged him to do so, Miss Bessie, but he would not, but went away with his herd to the northward, as he said to his den."

"I was half-tempted to put a man on his trail and see where he went, and find out something about him, but I thought it might be unkind."

"Decidedly so, I think, if he did not wish you to know."

"He did not, Miss Fontaine, for I frankly asked him who he was, and he replied:

"Your Unknown Pard."

"Yet why would he not return by the trail, so that we could thank him?" Colonel Fontaine inquired.

"That is just why, I guess; he did not wish to be thanked, for he seems to avoid expressions of gratitude."

"Yes, he appeared extremely modest; but you have no idea who he is, or aught about him, Captain Omohundro?"

"Not the slightest, Colonel Fontaine."

"He is an unfathomed mystery to me; but he is a bitter foe to the outlaws and our friend, and I only wish I did know who he is."

"Why he has those steers better trained than my horses, and they are as deadly in a charge as a cavalry regiment with drawn sabers, yes, even worse, for they toss their horns in a manner that is terrifying, and I do not blame the red-skins and outlaw from running from them."

"Nor I, for it was the most terrifying charge I ever saw, and how deadly the man's aim is, too."

"It is indeed, sir; but he must have found out in some way that the Indians were coming to join the outlaws, for he came on their trail."

"Did you not ask him how it was he appeared so opportunely?"

"I asked him, yes, but he replied that he was a prairie rover and went at will, while, discovering that there was danger to the train, he made his charge."

"Thank God he did; but has he deserted us, think you?"

"He seemed to anticipate no more trouble, and we will not leave you, Colonel Fontaine, until you have reached your settlement, and then you need have no dread of a raid upon you."

"So I have heard; but it is most kind of you to go with us, and we all appreciate it, Texas Jack," warmly said Colonel Fontaine.

"It is our duty, sir, for we are already settled and have our ranches, and our band is sworn to protect the border and aid those who need our services or who are in danger."

"In a couple of days we will be at your ranch and we will remain a while to help you get fixed up, when we will go on a scout and thence back to our own homes."

And Texas Jack was as good as his word, for two days after the train reached its destination, and where the other emigrants were to build homes, Colonel Fontaine and Adèle moved into Ethan Fontaine's cabin.

There were a few cowboys on the place, looking after the cattle, some three hundred in number, and as the colonel had written of his coming they had done all in their power to get things in condition to receive them.

The Fontaine cabin was a large one, with four good sized rooms and a kitchen, and it had been well built, while Leroy Lamar had done much to improve it during his stay there.

The furniture was put into it, which the colonel had brought along, and Mr. Langley and Bessie were made to remain there until their home, which was several miles away, could be built.

Texas Jack and his Cowboys worked like beavers, helping all, for a few days, and then they departed with the best wishes of all.

Several days after their departure, as Mr. Langley and Bessie had gotten their cabin up, Adèle mounted the horse of Mexican Mose, which Prairie Pilot had told her to keep, as he was a fine saddle animal, and started over to the Langley Ranch.

Her father was busy getting out rails for a fence, and so she went alone.

As she drew near the ranch of the Langleys, the horse she rode suddenly darted away down a trail that led toward the distant mountains.

She drew hard on the reins, but could not check him, for he seemed to have an iron mouth.

She was not at first alarmed, for she was a superb horsewoman, and expected to stop him before very long.

But as he still sped on like a bird, and she was leaving the ranch far behind her, she grew frightened and again sought to check his mad course.

But it seemed only to madden him the more, and he went all the faster for the pull on the bit.

"He will soon tire himself out," muttered Adèle.

But as the animal showed no sign of fatigue she recalled what speed and endurance he had shown when she and Bessie had chased him.

The mountains were now not a mile away, and looking behind her Adèle felt that it was many miles back to her home, and the sun was nearing the horizon.

In real fright now she tugged at the reins, but with no impression upon that iron mouth.

Then she glanced down as though to spring from his back, and bent over to release her foot from the stirrup, for it flashed upon her suddenly that the messenger-horse was carrying her to the outlaw camp, as he had been trained to go there on certain occasions.

To her dismay she found she had pressed such weight on her stirrup in trying to stop the horse that her foot had become fast in it, and she could not release it without stopping to do so.

She tried hard, but it was of no use.

Had she been able to free her foot, desperate as was the undertaking, alone on the prairie at night and on foot miles from home, she would have sprung from her saddle and sought to find her way back.

But, unable to release herself from the bondage of her stirrup, she felt that she could only let the horse run on until he was used up, and then perhaps she could manage him and turn him back toward the ranch.

It was just sunset when the animal, still running rapidly, drew near the heavily-timbered ridge of hills.

Out upon the prairie was bad enough, and most terrifying, but to be there alone in the timber and among those wild hills, the lair of wild beasts, was enough to cause the stoutest heart to shrink with fear, while to a young girl it was appalling.

When lost on the prairie before Adèle had had Bessie with her, and the young girl's pluck had helped her to bear up and not despair.

Now she was alone, on a runaway horse, and her foot fast in the stirrup.

And, worse still, the runaway was a messenger-horse, trained by the outlaws to return to the camp when free, and for all she could check him he might as well be free.

Another minute and the ridge was reached, and as the animal dashed into the timber a form suddenly sprang from behind a large tree and seized the rein of the runaway bringing him to a halt with a suddenness that nearly threw Adèle from her saddle.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MISSING.

WHEN night came on Colonel Fontaine returned from his work in the timber.

He really had begun to enjoy life there in the wilds of Texas, and looked forward to a happy home in the future.

He worked hard all day, but when he got fully settled he knew that he could rest.

The cabin looked most inviting, and Adèle had done all in her power to make it so.

She had brought many things from their old home which her father had thought unnecessary, and afterward had been glad that she had done so.

There were carpets on the floor, curtains at the windows, and pieces of furniture here and there that were heirlooms in the Fontaine family.

Her father's office-desk, a massive and elegant piece of furniture, presented to him by his clerks one Christmas, Adèle had brought along, although it had taken up nearly the room of an entire wagon to do so.

The family portraits, and a painting, sketch or engraving here and there, favorites of her father, were also brought to improve the frontier home.

The house was well built, the rooms large, and it presented an appearance after it was whitewashed and in perfect order, that no other house on the frontier did, and Bessie Langley had said to Adèle that she intended to copy after her in her home.

There was a large plot fenced in for a vegetable garden, and flowers were to be planted in the front yard.

A chicken-yard, out-houses and all that was needed for a perfect home were going up rapidly, and it was no wonder that the colonel and his daughter looked with pride upon their sur-

roundings, what they had done in the six weeks they had been there and felt that they would enjoy their life in Texas.

And to this home came Colonel Fontaine from his work in the timber, tired and hungry.

He was not met as was always the case with Adèle at the door, and he wondered where she was.

But he put on his slippers and dressing-gown, prepared to make himself comfortable, and sat musing upon the broad piazza for a long while, when one of the servants came and asked where Miss Adèle was.

The colonel did not know, and was told that she had gone to the Langley Ranch, intending to ride back by the timber and come home with him.

He at once grew alarmed, for darkness had already fallen.

So ordering his horse, and accompanied by a negro man he set off for the Langley Ranch.

To his dismay he found she had not been there, and at once the alarm was given.

Men went to all of the settler homes around, but to none of them had she been, it was said.

Then some of the cowboys reported having seen signs of Indians about, and inquiry proved that the trail had crossed the way to Mr. Langley's.

So the night passed away, and with the first glimmer of dawn Colonel Fontaine and a large party went to the spot where the Indian trail had been seen.

There were a dozen or more hoof-tracks, in Indian file, except at one place on the trail, and this was where there were signs of a horse having halted away to the left.

The colonel and others knew that this was the track of the horse which Adèle had ridden.

He was shod, and they had told him she had gone away on the horse which had been Mexican Mose's.

"She is the captive of Indians, I fear," said the colonel, with quivering voice.

Then there was a council held as to what should be done, and at once the services of nearly all the settlers were offered, for some must remain to guard the place.

"We will follow the Indian trail," said the colonel, who, in spite of his grief, was calm and determined.

The trail of Messenger, as they had named the horse which Adèle had ridden, was lost by the trail of the red-skin ponies going over it, and that seemed proof of her having been captured by them.

So each man was to go home, fully arm and equip himself, and meet at the trail by noon.

But, as they were about to depart, there came the sound of hoofs, and into view dashed the Masked Rider.

He was mounted upon his black steer and followed by a score of other splendid animals.

He drew rein as he saw the party and was greeted with a loud cheer by all who recalled how much of gratitude they owed to him.

Colonel Fontaine at once spurred to his side and said:

"My friend, my daughter has been captured by Indians, and we are just preparing to follow their trail."

"When was she captured, sir?" asked the deep voice of the Steer Rider.

"At sunset last evening, I suppose, for she left home to go to Mr. Langley's ranch, and return for me, from where I was working in the timber."

"She did not return home, and search this morning found her trail here, and some of the cowboys have seen Indians, and see, there is where they crossed, and also halted."

The Masked Steer Rider said nothing, but, dismounting, closely examined all the signs.

He went about it quietly, and was so long that the suspense grew terrible with Colonel Fontaine, but he did not interrupt him.

Then he said:

"There are the tracks here of fifteen Indian ponies, and they lead to the northward."

"Now, I came here, Colonel Fontaine, to put you all on your guard that there was a hunting-party of Comanches who had come down here and might make a raid on your settlement."

"This morning at dawn I struck the camp of these fellows, and as they seem to have a wholesome dread of my Demon Herd, as the cowboys call it, they took to flight."

"I chased them for a while, with more or less results, and then came here to warn you, though I do not believe that they will prove very dangerous, now that they are discovered, and I left them heading for the northward toward their villages."

"And was not my poor child with them?" cried the colonel, anxiously.

"She was not, sir."

"You are sure?"

"I am, Colonel Fontaine. Miss Fontaine was not with the Indians I saw."

"You got near enough to see them?"

"I got near enough to use my revolvers, sir."

"Then some other band must have her."

"And yet this is the band I saw, for I came on their trail here and as I have made the entire circuit of your settlement there are, I am sure, no other red-skins about."

"Yet my child is missing."

"True, sir; and yet these two trails, that of her horse and that of the red-skins go in opposite directions, and the Indians passed along after Miss Fontaine."

"Their horses were in a walk, hers in a run, as the tracks plainly show to me, and experienced bordermen here will tell you the same."

"That devilish horse then may have run away with her and killed her."

"She rode a vicious horse, then?"

"She rode the messenger-horse of that outlaw, Mexican Moses."

"Ah!"

There was much in the expression of the Masked Rider.

He then went back to the trail and examined it, and, mounting his steer, followed it along slowly.

The others mounted and followed him in silence, relying with perfect confidence upon him.

CHAPTER XLVII.

ALONE ON THE TRAIL.

THE Masked Rider held on his way in silence. He did not look behind, did not utter a word, but now and then would dismount and follow the trail on foot, where it seemed faint.

Thus miles were gone over, and not once had one of those who followed him addressed a single word to him.

They kept well back, their eyes upon his every movement, and talking in low, suppressed tones.

Bessie Langley joined the party on horseback, but if the Masked Rider knew of her coming he did not show sign of it. And she too eagerly watched him, while the colonel whispered to her:

"That remarkable man will find out the truth."

"He seems to have the instinct of an animal added to that of the human being, for there is not a man here who has not lost the trail, only now and then discovering a track, and yet see how unerringly he goes."

Bessie's eyes were red from weeping, for she had learned to love Adèle as dearly as a sister.

She could not bear the suspense at home, so had mounted her horse to join the men in the search.

These were the colonel and his ranchmen, Mr. Langley and his, with a dozen settlers, in all some thirty men who were hanging on the next words of the Masked Steer Rider with a suspense that was painful.

He took matters quietly, seemed in no hurry, but went to work in a way that gave perfect confidence in him.

Thus were miles gone over, and then he left the timber and branched out over the prairie.

He mounted his black steer here and went on at a rapid gallop, trying the speed of some to keep up.

He seemed to follow the trail, which only a few of the cowboys of the party could discern, to give courage to the others by saying that the Masked Rider was right, like a hound on the track.

The hills loomed up ahead, and it was a remarkable sight to see that one man on the trail, striking the ridge just where Adèle had the night before.

"He knows what he is about," said a cowboy to the colonel.

"Never saw nuthin like it," another remarked.

"He'd beat Texas Jack, I does believe."

"Yas, and Prairie Pilot, and Buckskin Sam, Chestnut Charlie and ther whole outfit, and that are sayin' beaps, for them Terrors is trail-ers from 'way back," said a third cowboy.

At last the Masked Rider halted, dismounted and looked about him carefully.

Then he went on foot, his faithful black steer following and the rest of his herd obediently coming on behind the party.

A mile was passed over in the hills, and then the Steer Rider halted and turned to the others.

"Colonel Fontaine, I have discovered all I care to know, sir," he said, in his quiet way.

"Well, sir, if you have you can see what none of the rest of us can, and I have perfect confidence that you can do so."

"I will first say that your daughter is not the captive of Indians."

"Thank Heaven for that, for she had better be dead."

"She rode the messenger-horse, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, back on the settler's trail he bolted with her and ran in this direction."

"The Indians came along afterward, saw the trail, turned upon it, then gave it up and went on their way as before, crossing the settler's trail."

"They also followed back on the trail of your daughter's horse to where it left the settler's trail, and then crossing went on their way to the camp where I surprised them at dawn this morning and some ten miles from your home, Mr. Langley, for they passed back of your ranch."

"Your daughter's horse, either running away

or forced into a run by his rider, came on here to the hills."

"I can see no reason why she should push him to a run, for she was not pursued, nor was she in chase of anything, such as a deer."

"The trail shows this, for there is but one."

"She came on here, and yet her horse kept on at a run from some cause."

"As he slackened his speed at the hill back yonder a man on foot caught him, for the tracks of a booted foot are there, with a spur on it, as the spur-marks are on the ground."

"So it was no Indian."

"His horse was back in the timber, and he led your daughter's horse there, mounted, and the two rode on together to this point, where there were six other horsemen waiting."

"Then the party started toward the Rio Grande."

"Colonel Fontaine, your daughter has been seized for ransom and is the captive of the Red Revolver Rangers!"

"Great God!" broke from the colonel's lips, while all were astounded at the manner in which the Masked Rider had read the trails.

That he had read them aright no one doubted.

Then he said:

"Colonel Fontaine, have you not a horse in the settlement that was captured from the outlaws, the day of the fight at the mother?"

"Yes, sir, this horse I am riding was caught by one of the men, who sold him to me."

"I will ask you to let me take him, and I will continue on the trail, but alone."

"I will also ask you to send for Texas Jack and the Rangers, all of them, and to get as many settlers as can leave their ranches and come to the Quicksand Ford of the Rio Grande."

"There is a canyon a mile from there, which Texas Jack knows of, and he will find me there, or a letter from me in one of the clefts of the cliff just over the spring."

"If I am not there, or there is no letter from me, tell Texas Jack to come on by night to the retreat over the Rio Grande, of the Red Revolver Rangers."

"Chestnut Charlie knows it well, and he must take the place and rescue your daughter; but if I am at the canyon, or a letter from me, then there will be another way to act."

"I only speak of attacking the retreat in case I should be killed."

"I will ask you, sir, to take my herd back with you, excepting my black and my white steers, which go with me."

"Mount the red one, Red skin, and as I will not need my lance, take it, and they will follow you."

"When you wish to halt, move your lance so, and when you wish to have them follow, do this way," and the Steer Rider suited the actions to the words.

"When you come back with the Rangers, bring my herd, for we may need them."

"Now, sir, I will be off as soon as I see you started."

There were words of deep gratitude from the colonel, and one of the cowboys giving him his saddle, he mounted Red-skin, took the lance and rode back on the trail, the herd following obediently.

Then all went back toward the settlement, excepting the Masked Steer Rider.

They left him standing in the timber, by the side of the colonel's horse, and his splendid black and white steers were near him.

He was to take the trail alone.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A PRIZE.

WHEN Adèle felt her horse so suddenly reined back she nearly lost her seat in the saddle, and had she not been a splendid horsewoman she would have been thrown to the ground.

She beheld by the side of her horse, his hand grasping the rein, a man whose face was masked.

He was tall, well-formed, and dressed in a Mexican riding-suit.

But a glance showed her into whose hands she had fallen, for he wore a belt in which she saw a pair of red revolvers and a long knife with red handle and scabbard.

Her heart sunk within her with dread, but yet, with an effort she controlled herself and said:

"Unhand my rein, sir, this instant."

"Miss Fontaine, I rejoice too well to meet you to allow you to go from me, which you surely would do did I release your rein."

"You are my prize, fair lady."

"Your prize! what do you mean, sir?"

"That I am Don Diaz, Chief of the Red Revolver Rangers, and claim you as my prize, for you will bring me a heavy ransom."

"And it is in the hands of a cut-throat that I have unfortunately fallen!" she said, with scorn in her voice.

"No; I use the revolver, not the knife."

"I am a trail tax-gatherer, Miss Fontaine, and I risk my life to gain the fortune which, somehow, I feel that the world owes me."

"I saw you coming across the prairie at full speed, and noticing the horse that you rode, I

knew that it was one of my own animals and that he was demonstrating my training by coming home when he got the chance and bringing you with him.

"I considered myself in luck, for I was on my way with half a dozen picked men who are back on the ridge to your neighborhood, intending to kidnap you and the pretty Miss Langley.

"You have saved me much time and trouble, Miss Fontaine, and I will be content with you and let Miss Langley go—until another time.

"Of late I have kept very quiet in Mexico, for after my unsuccessful attack upon your train, I knew Texas would be too hot for me, so I crossed the Rio to wage a war for gold upon my Mexican neighbors.

"Now, Miss Fontaine, I have told you all there is to tell, except that you must go with me to my stronghold in Mexico."

"I would rather die."

"Oh, no, for one can die but once.

"I will treat you with marked respect, and communicate with your father regarding your ransom.

"When that is paid, I will let you go, but not until then.

"Be a philosopher, Miss Fontaine, and make the best of your situation, not causing me to use violent methods."

"There is nothing for me to do, sir, but submit, and I do so with the best grace that one can who knows she is in the hands of a cut-throat and robber."

"I am sorry you use harsh terms toward me, Miss Fontaine, for it will only cause me to add to the ransom your father has to pay, as I shall add a hundred dollars for every epithet, running it up, you see, into the thousands, over the ten thousand I wish, before your lovely face can again gladden the ranch of your father."

"Ten thousand dollars?"

"So I said."

"My poor father is not worth more than the half of it."

"I have an idea that he is rich."

"You are mistaken."

"He had a large fortune."

"True, and lost it, and came here to Texas because he was poor.

"The ranch was in his name, also the cattle, which my brother had here, and he came here to find a new home, after losing his fortune."

"You may believe he is poor, Miss Fontaine, but your father is rich, and he came to Texas for a purpose I know full well, for he is well aware just where he can lay hands upon a very handsome fortune."

"There is no need to argue with you, sir, so I will desist.

"But what is your intention regarding me?"

"To take you to my stronghold, treat you with marked respect, and negotiate for your ransom.

"When the sum I demand is paid, you are to go free.

"Come, it is getting dark, and we must join my men and then ride on to-night, after a rest and supper, for I am anxious to recross the river as soon as possible."

"I am ready, sir," was the reply of Adèle, who had made up her mind to accept the situation as best she could.

"How fortunate that my love of a pretty view brought me here to see the sunset, for I saw you coming and could hardly believe my eyes.

"I saw, too, where your horse was to come in to the hills, and so headed him off.

"I am in great good fortune, Miss Fontaine."

"And I in sad misfortune, Sir Robber—"

"Ah! there is another hundred to add, Miss Fontaine," and with his hand on the bridle-rein of her horse, he led the way back into the timber.

He soon came upon his own horse, and mounting, placed himself by the side of Adèle, and then rode on.

Reaching a temporary camp, Adèle saw half a dozen men gathered about a fire, cooking supper.

They sprung to their feet at sight of her, and without explanation of her presence there, the chief said:

"Men, prepare supper for this lady, and then we will return across the Rio."

He offered to aid her to alight, but she sprung to the ground without his assistance, and sat down by a tree near the fire.

The men soon gave her a broiled steak, some crackers and a cup of coffee, and to her own surprise she ate heartily.

After an hour's rest, she mounted, and the party set off on a trail to the westward.

The chief still wore his mask, but the faces of the men were unmasked, and Adèle shuddered at the evil she read in them.

CHAPTER XLIX.

ADELE'S PLUCK.

HAVING decided to make the best of her unfortunate situation, Adèle Fontaine uttered no word of complaint and rode on in silence.

Several times she was tempted to dash away and try the speed of Messenger against that of

the other horses; but she remembered that she would hardly better her situation, as she would be alone on the plains at midnight, and that the horse she rode was not one to be managed.

So she rode on in silence, only replying when the chief addressed her.

At last the Rio Grande was reached, and once across a halt was made among the mesquites to rest.

A wicky-up was made for Adèle, and the chief and the men supplied her with *serapes* and made her as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

She was tired, and at once dropped off to sleep.

When she awoke, the sun was up.

She sprung to her feet with a full and sad realization of her position.

But she had slept well, was rested and very hungry.

Not far away was a rivulet, and she went there and bathed her face and hands, making her toilet as best she could.

Then she was called by the chief, who she knew had not allowed her to go beyond a safe distance, and she was given a breakfast of antelope steak, a broiled bird, hoeecake, and coffee.

She ate all with a relish, and the chief approached, still masked, and said:

"I am glad to see that you are not moping, Miss Fontaine."

"How did you rest last night?"

"I slept well, for I was very tired, and fortunately was able to forget that I was the captive of the Red Revolver Rangers."

"I am ready to go on the way, sir, whenever you command."

"Your horse will be ready soon, and we will start," and the chief walked away.

"That girl has wonderful nerve," he muttered soon after, as he saw her gathering a bouquet of wild flowers.

"City-born and bred, a belle in fashionable society, beautiful as a houri, and yet quietly adapting herself to a situation which would drive many women mad with fright."

"I must watch her close, or she may give me the slip, for she has the pluck to escape if she gets the chance."

As he approached her she asked:

"May I ride your horse to-day, Sir Chief, for he seems to be such a fine riding animal?"

"Certainly, I will change with you," he said, and he gave the order to one of the men for the transfer of saddles.

It was soon done, and Adèle mounted the superb roan of the chief with a twinkle in her eyes that boded mischief.

"Now, sir, I am ready; but what a superb horse!" she said, and she rode about the camp, as though trying his paces while the men were getting their animals ready.

Suddenly the roan's head was turned, and he went off like a rocket, under the sudden cut of Adèle's whip.

The chief had not mounted Messenger, for one of the men was just putting his saddle on the horse for him.

The other men had just gone after their horses, staked out not far away, so that Adèle had well chosen her opportunity to escape.

She had argued to herself that the animal ridden by Don Diaz must be the fleetest of all the other horses, and also possessed of wonderful endurance, for his fine points she saw, and she was a good judge of horseflesh.

Once she could get away, and she could distance pursuit, and crossing the Rio Grande she must certainly meet some one, or come upon a ranch, and find protection.

She saw that she would gain a couple of hundred yards' start before the chief and his men could mount and follow, and that they would fire upon her she did not believe.

There were some mesquites growing near, and then some heavier timber, and she would seek shelter by placing these between her and her foes.

They were armed only with revolvers, she had noticed, and she would soon be out of range of these, mounted on the splendid roan, and at any rate she would take the chances of their firing upon her.

She had, when she had gone to the spring on rising, noticed the plain trail of their coming there to camp.

She remembered that the Rio Grande was not far away, and she could follow the trail there at a run, and perhaps on the Texan shore.

At any rate she would make the attempt. And so it was she had asked to exchange horses with the chief, and in seemingly trying his paces had edged further and further away.

When she darted away, for an instant even the chief seemed too taken aback to speak, or to move.

She had so soon carried out his prophecy that he was speechless.

And all this time the roan was fairly flying away beyond pursuit.

But then the Don suddenly recollected himself, and placing a whistle to his lips gave a long, loud, ringing blast.

It was repeated, and it reached the ears of the gallant roan.

He started, wheeled, and in spite of all that Adèle could do, ran back to his master.

Adèle was very pale, and her eyes flashed with anger.

The horse halted near his master, who said quietly:

"You are a superb horsewoman, Miss Fontaine, and have wonderful pluck, which would have set you free, had not my horse been trained to obey my call.

"We will ride on to my stronghold," and mounting Messenger he placed himself by her side, seeming to enjoy her deep chagrin at being defeated in her bold attempt to escape.

CHAPTER I.

THE DON'S CAPTIVE.

AFTER her unsuccessful attempt to escape, Adèle relapsed into indignant silence.

She fairly hated the beautiful roan, and felt unkindly toward the horse which had gotten her into her trouble.

To try the same thing again she knew would be useless, and this the chief had proven by allowing her to still ride his roan, while he was mounted upon Messenger.

She lost interest in her love of nature, and scarcely glanced at the scenery about her.

For miles the chief rode on without a halt, merely remarking that he wished to reach his destination before a rest.

After several hours' ride, the nature of the country changed and they entered the mountainous lands.

Then they came into the very midst of the range, and, to the surprise of Adèle, they rode upon a small cabin, hiding away in a canyon.

It was a lonely spot, with high rock walls on either side of the canyon, rising seventy feet above the roof, and to scale them would be impossible.

A stream ran before the cabin door, deep and clear, and there was a wealth of undergrowth and velvety grass about.

"Miss Fontaine, let me say that here is your home, and you are to have the cabin to yourself."

"I will tell you frankly that escape is impossible."

"My stronghold is not very far away, but I prefer to keep you here, away from the gaze of my men."

"At either end of this canyon wall, several hundred feet away in each direction, I shall have two guards, and, as I trust no man, I will have spies to watch them so that they cannot sell out to you, for I know you will attempt to buy them."

"You see I am determined that you shall not escape, and that I will reap the amount of your ransom, for your father will pay me the ten thousand in full, I know, and the odd hundreds as a salve to the pain you caused me in heaping epithets upon me, for I am sensitive about being called a cut-throat and a thief, though in reality I am nothing else, Miss Fontaine."

"I am glad that you realize just what you are, sir," she said, with contempt in her tone and look.

"Yes, it is more than most of us do, I admit."

"But let me tell you, Miss Fontaine, that you will find this cabin comfortable, and it is not badly furnished, as you see, for I have gathered the furnishings from both Mexican and Texan homes."

"One of my men is an excellent cook, for he held the place of *chef* in an elegant home in the City of Mexico until he killed his master, in a fit of temper, and came to serve me."

"He will cook you your meals at what hours you may desire, and if there is aught you may wish, send me word by him."

"I will at once send a communication to your father, telling him my terms, so you need not expect to remain here very long."

"This cabin was once the home of one as beautiful as yourself, but she accepted the terms I offered and departed, so that is a good omen for you."

"I bid you good-morning, Miss Fontaine."

He raised his sombrero as he spoke and turned away, while Adèle entered the cabin.

An outlaw unsaddled the roan and hung the saddle and bridle on a peg within the door, and he too departed.

Then Adèle was left alone, and she gazed about her with interest.

The spot was a wild one but picturesque, and the cabin small but comfortable.

The brook was but a few yards away, and there were trees scattered here and there.

But the walls of the canyon, rising straight and high up and down as far as she could see, told her plainly that she was in a prison.

The cabin was really pleasantly furnished.

There was a door and two windows, a matting on the floor, a cot with neat bedding, and some books, odds and ends of various kinds and a table and cupboard.

She made herself at home at once, in lieu of aught else to do.

Her riding habit was pinned up to serve as a dress, and, to her surprise, in one of the drawers of a chest she found some feminine apparel.

Soon after there came a knock at the door.

She opened it to find a trim-looking Mexican, who said, in broken English:

"I am Carlos, señorita, who is to wait on you."

"Very well, Carlos; give me dinner as soon as you can, for I am hungry."

"Yes, señorita; I will set the table under the tree."

"What time would you have your meals, señorita?"

"Breakfast at eight, dinner at two, and supper at dark will do."

The Mexican looked surprised at the extreme coolness of the maiden, whom he knew to be a captive, and, bowing, retired.

An hour after he called Adèle to dinner, and he had set a small rustic table under the trees and prepared a very tempting repast which she did full justice to.

"The chief told me to say that the señorita was to make herself at home, and she would find wearing-apparel in the chest, for this cabin is where he has kept the lady captives while waiting for ransom."

Adèle made no reply, and the Mexican soon after departed, telling her he would return and prepare a supper.

After a *siesta* in a hammock that Carlos had put up for her, Adèle strolled up the canyon, as though intent upon gathering the wild flowers that here and there were to be seen.

She wished to see for herself if the guards were at the head of the canyon.

Suddenly, at the spot where the precipitous walls of rocks were broken, and the canyon spread away on either side into a valley, she was calmly confronted by a man who rose from a rock pile, where she now saw another, seated upon a *serape*, and that they had been playing cards was evident.

"The señorita must not pass me," said the man, almost rudely.

She turned and walked back, and following her tour of investigation, soon reached the other end of the canyon.

There also were two men, one asleep, the other amusing himself with a pack of cards.

"Yer mustn't go by, miss, fer them is ther chief's orders," said the man, politely, as he arose and confronted her.

"Suppose I offer you a handsome sum in money, will you not aid me to escape, for you know I am a captive, held for ransom by your chief, and though my father can never pay the sum Don Diaz demands, he can give to you a thousand dollars, and I will pledge it to you?"

"Life is dearer than gold, miss, and ther chief w'd kill me ef he tracked me ter another kentry."

"I feels sorry, miss, but it hain't no use ter beg me, and ther settles it."

With a sigh Adèle turned away, realizing that there was no hope of escape for her that she could then discover.

CHAPTER LI.

THE DON'S SECRET.

WHEN Don Diaz left the cabin, where he had so securely hidden his beautiful captive, he rode through the mountains for the distance of a mile.

Then he came upon the canyon, which turned in to his stronghold, already described, and where the Queen of the Red Revolver Rangers had her home.

He rode on up to the pretty little house, and as he dismounted, a peon took his horse, and from a hammock arose the "Queen," and came toward him.

"You were not long away, Diaz," she said, softly, as she greeted him.

"No, I found the Texas side of the Rio in arms, so returned to await until all quieted down, Leilah."

"Ah, Diaz, if you would only give up this lawless life you lead, I believe I could be content, yet never happy."

"Will you not do so, Diaz, for my sake?"

"Leilah, I made up my mind to possess a fortune, one large enough to enable us to leave this land and live in luxury where I was unknown."

"I have made money by gambling, and I have made it by my lawless deeds; but I have met with reverses, too, and I have not yet the sum I need to live as I wish."

"In another month or so I hope to have, for I know a scheme now by which I can find a certain treasure that has long been hidden."

"If I can get that, then I will have all we want for a life of luxury, and I will take you to Europe, and we can utterly wipe out the past from our lives."

"Ah, no, Diaz, that we can never do."

"I can never forget that I wedded you, knowing you to be a lawless man."

"I can never forget that I have lived here, your wife, while you have crimsoned your hands with blood, and you can never wipe out the stains upon your conscience."

"You are on the path to the gallows, Diaz, and some day you will regret that you heeded not my warning and left Texas and Mexico while you could do so."

"Your men say that you have met with re-

verses of late, and many of them have been killed, and I have heard that you have a masked avenger, a mysterious man who has a herd of trained cattle, who hangs upon your trail for revenge alone."

"Fly from here at once, Diaz, or else it will be too late, for a dread foreboding fills my heart."

The man was impressed by her earnest manner, and there came to him the same sinking sensation, the same awe he had felt when flying for his life from the Masked Steer Rider.

So he said:

"Well, Leilah, I pledge you my word, I will leave here as soon as I get possession of that hidden treasure."

"I am glad to hear you say so, and I only hope it is true that you will go; but now tell me about this man that dares call himself Leroy Lamar."

"He is a fool, and merely said so because he did not wish to give his own name and so spoke the one he first thought of."

"He told me he was sorry he had said that he was Leroy Lamar."

"He knew him then?"

"Yes, in the past."

"He is your lieutenant?"

"Yes, I gave him Antonio's place, for he saved my life, is as brave as a lion, and a good plainsman, while he is a gentleman."

"Was a gentleman, you mean, for now he is an outlaw, a member of your band."

"Have it your own way, Leilah," was the reply, and the chief strolled away among the cabins of his men.

But he returned after a visit to his lieutenant's quarters, and his face wore a troubled look.

It was evident that he was worried at Leilah's warning, and he determined to heed it.

But there was a secret he kept from his beautiful wife, and that was the fair captive's presence in the canyon.

CHAPTER LII.

THE MEETING IN THE CANYON.

THE Masked Steer Rider was a perfect trailer.

There was not a sign that he could not read like a book, where it was visible upon the prairies or in the mountains.

He had read aright the capture of Adèle Fontaine, and more, he determined to recapture her.

He knew the difficult task, the most dangerous work before him, and he sent for his ally, Texas Jack.

With the Terrors, and the colonel and the settlers near at hand, to call upon if needed, he felt that he could accomplish much.

And so he went alone on the trail.

He followed it to the Rio Grande River, and he went on the horse captured from the outlaws the day of their fight with the train.

"This horse will take me to the stronghold if I lose the trail," he said, to himself, and it showed his wisdom in thinking of the animal.

He came upon the camp where the outlaws had halted for the night.

He saw that they believed pursuit impossible, as no one would know just what had become of Adèle.

From there he rode on into the Mexican mountains, still keeping the trail.

His black and white steers followed patiently behind him, and when he camped at night he did not have to fasten them.

"They would never leave him, as a horse might."

It was afternoon of the next day when he came to where the horse wished to turn off from the trail.

There were many tracks visible, and the horse wished to go to the left; but the trail he followed led to the right.

"Ah! the stronghold is in that direction, while the outlaws and their captive have gone this way."

"I take this trail, but I am near their den, so must be careful."

"I will go on foot."

He rode back and branched off into the mountains.

He went on until he found a spot that suited him, and it was nearly a mile from where he had left the trail.

It was a tiny vale, with water and grass in abundance, and in it he turned his two steers, and staked out his horse, where he could both feed and get water.

Taking a red ribbon from his pocket he stretched it across the mouth of the little vale, some thirty feet only, and muttered to himself:

"They will not pass this, I know."

Frail as it was the two steers had been trained not to break through the crimson barrier.

Then the Masked Unknown set off on foot.

He had left his spurs behind him, but carried his rifle, and in his belt were three six-shooters.

He was ready for work. He scouted along the ridge, near the trail, and suddenly came to a halt at a precipice.

He gazed over, to quickly start back.

He had looked down upon the heads of two men, seated upon a *serape*, playing cards.

He glanced up the canyon and his eyes fell upon a cabin.

"Ah!" he said, with a peculiar expression in the exclamation.

He then went along the ridge and looked over down upon the cabin.

He saw there something that startled him, and he drew quickly back as he beheld up the canyon two more men playing cards, for it was all that the outlaws on duty could do.

What he saw just beneath him was a hammock and in it none other than the one he sought, Adèle Fontaine.

He measured the height of the canyon wall, and then the distance to a tree near.

Then he walked back among the mountains, the way he had come.

As he passed into a glen he halted, for he came suddenly upon one who brought a cry to his lips and made him stand like one struck dumb.

It was a woman he had come upon, Leilah, the outlaws' Queen, and she had her arms full of wild flowers.

She was alone, and looked very beautiful, with her gold-embroidered *sombrero* and pretty costume.

"Leilah! Leilah! is it you alive, when I deemed you dead?"

She had seen him as he did her, and she had stopped suddenly and then dropped her hand upon a revolver in the silk sash she wore about her slender waist.

"I should know that voice, but your face is masked."

"Who is it that dares call me Leilah?"

"Your brother!"

She uttered a glad cry and sprang toward him, and he folded her in his arms, while he said quickly:

"My sister, when you were taken from us by that arch-fiend, we would have given chase and rescued you; but our home was attacked by what we deemed were Indians, and mother was slain and father carried off into captivity."

"I learned long afterward, when I recovered from two severe wounds and an attack of brain fever, that you had been killed in attempting to escape from your captors, and that those we deemed were Indians were that devil's men disguised as such."

"I also heard that father had been put to death by his captors."

"Then I swore to some day avenge you and my parents; but something changed my plans, which I will tell you of some day, and only the last year have I taken to the trail of revenge, and I am here now, masked and unknown, to rescue a beautiful girl whom Don Diaz has now in captivity not half a mile from here."

He had spoken rapidly, and every word she had seemed to fairly drink in.

Her face was livid now, and when he ceased speaking she asked:

"A captive, you say, brother?"

"Yes."

"How long has she been there?"

"He kidnapped her in Texas, three days ago, and brought her here."

"Brother, I have a confession to make to you, one that will humble me in the dust before you."

"I loved the man who has thus wronged us, and I fled with him, after you had warned me of him."

"I became his wife and he brought me here, to my home, his stronghold, not a mile away, to live."

"Then I discovered all that he was, and yet clung to him."

"I knew not that he it was until a few days ago, when a dying outlaw told me that he was the murderer of my mother and father, and then I hated him and vowed revenge, and I came up this canyon to seek one, a Texan, whom I believed I could trust, and intended to have betray this camp, for I cannot pass beyond the guards, and how you came here I know not."

"I came along the ridge; but pray continue, my poor, unhappy sister, and let me tell you now that I forgive you, for well I know that love may drive one to any deed."

"God bless you, brother; but I hate Don Diaz now more than I ever loved him, and I will do all in my power to aid you bring him to the gallows," and she spoke with a fierceness that fairly startled the man.

"You need not aid me, for I know all, when you tell me if yonder canyon does not lead to the stronghold?"

"Yes, and the guard is on the cliff above, and he sees all passing in though not himself seen."

"I thank you, and now return to the stronghold and hope, for we must not be seen, and danger dogs us here."

"Some day, soon I hope, I will come for you, and I will come with those who will aid me to punish the Red Revolver Rangers for their crimes—"

"Hark! I hear hoof falls."

"Yes, some one watching me, for I am constantly watched—go, brother, and I will hope."

He bounded away and she continued gathering wild flowers, while around a bend in the canyon came a horseman.

It was Don Diaz, and he said sternly:

"Leilah, you must not come so far from the cabin."

"Is it dangerous, Diaz?" she asked innocently.

"Yes, dangerous—to me," he muttered, and dismounting he walked by her side back down the canyon, little dreaming that the eyes of the Masked Rider were upon him.

CHAPTER LIII.

UNDER COVER OF THE NIGHT.

ADELE was seated at the table in the cabin reading a book which she had found there and in which she had become interested in spite of her captivity.

Suddenly she started, for there came a tap at one of the windows.

Did the chief send a message to her, or any one come? why did they not come to the door?

She arose and went to the window, and again came the knock.

It was not a loud one, but a very cautious tapping, given as though the one without did not care to attract other attention than her own.

"What if it should be a rescuer?"

The question was hardly asked herself before it was answered:

"That would be impossible here."

But the knock came a third time, and she asked:

"Who is there?"

"The Unknown!"

She started, and then said:

"Wait, I will open the shutter."

She went and blew out the lamp, and then unfastened and opened the shutter.

In the darkness she saw the tall form of the Masked Man who was such a mystery to all.

"I have come for you, Miss Fontaine, so please be ready to go at once, and pardon me if I have to take you up into mid-air to escape."

He spoke with the utmost calmness, as though there was no danger in his being there, no desperate peril to risk.

She was equal to the situation, and replied:

"I believe you are the only one who could have over come here."

"I will be ready in a minute. Will you need my side saddle?"

"Yes; please get it."

She soon came to the window again, and he lifted out the saddle and then took her out as though she had been a child.

Then the shutter was closed and he led her to the base of the canyon wall.

"Here are a couple of lariats, and I will make them fast about you, then ascend myself and draw you up."

"You need have no dread of falling."

"I have none; I trust you wholly."

He fastened the lariats securely about her waist, in a kind of a harness, and made the saddle secure also.

Then grasping firmly the lariats, he went up like a sailor hand over hand out of sight.

Soon after she felt herself lifted from the ground, and she was drawn slowly and steadily upward, and then seized by the strong arm of the Masked Steer Rider, and placed upon the top of the cliff.

"My cattle are but a short distance from here, and fortunately I have a horse for you to ride."

"I would not fear one of your steers with you present," was her reply, and shouldering her saddle, he led the way along the ridge.

They soon reached the vale where he had left the horse and two steers, and they were soon ready for the trail.

He placed Adele upon the horse, and mounting the black steer, led the way out of the vale.

She followed behind him, and the white steer brought up the rear.

Then they went down out of the mountains to the plains, and were soon at the river.

They crossed, and the Masked Rider led the way to the rendezvous which he had appointed with Colonel Fontaine.

He rode to the spot, to be suddenly greeted with:

"Halt! Hand up!"

"The Unknown," was the stern reply, and the men could hardly refrain from a cheer as Adele rode forward and was lifted from her saddle by her father, while Texas Jack sprang to the side of the Masked Rider and cried:

"Unknown Pard, you beat 'em all, and my word for it."

"I am glad to find you here, Captain Omohundro, for I feared it was too soon."

"Oh, we rode for all we could get out of the cattle, and got here two hours ago."

"How many men?"

"There are fourteen Terrors besides myself, and twenty two settlers under the colonel."

"Thirty-eight of us all told, and we can do it."

"Do what?"

"Take the stronghold of the Red Revolver

Rangers," was the reply, and he added: "We will start at once, and I think Miss Fontaine will not mind the ride back."

The colonel now came forward, and after a few minutes' conversation it was decided to go at once to the stronghold, which could be reached by dawn, and, before the discovery of Adele's escape, and could be taken with a gallant charge.

As they moved out of the canyon Adele rode up to the side of the Masked Unknown and said:

"May I ride by you, sir?"

"Certainly, but—"

"I have something to tell you."

"To tell me?"

"Yes, I know you."

"Know me?"

"You are Leroy Lamar!"

He was silent for a moment, and then said:

"And you have penetrated my disguise?"

"I have, and to-night, by your voice, and your bearing."

"Why did you hide from me who you were?"

"Are you aware that your father drove me from him, under the charge of stealing from him twenty thousand dollars?"

"Yes, I never for an instant believed you guilty, and often since he has said that he was wrong."

"Ah! he has discovered it then?"

"Discovered what?"

"The money."

"No."

"Then let me tell you a secret, and one of my life, and I will try and clear my name of dishonor."

"I am a Texan, and my father was once a prominent man; but he killed a man in a duel and it was the cause of his ruin."

"He came to Texas and my mother, my sister and myself were all of his family."

"Leilah, my sister, and I were brought up on the prairies, and our parents were our teachers, while we enjoyed our life here."

"But my sister met and loved a man who was a villain, though she did not at first believe so, and in fact he was none other than the man you know as Don Diaz."

"One day I went as guide to a gentleman who was just from the Mexican mines."

"We were attacked by Indians, and they were beaten off."

"But he was wounded, and the treasure he had we buried one night, and only three of us knew where it was."

"One was your father, who came up with a party of soldiers the day after the Indian fight, the others were the miner and myself."

"That gentleman died, and I carried his papers to a lawyer in New Orleans to whom he bade me take them, and he gave me money to go there and back, and to give the lawyer a map of just where to find the treasure."

"This I did, and, some years after, Dyas Purdy—or, as he changed his name, Diaz Perdido—ran off with my sister, and, with his outlaw band disguised as Indians, burned our home, shot my mother, wounded me and carried my father away a prisoner."

"He supposed my father had been the miner's guide, and tried to force from him the secret of where the treasure was buried."

"He carried my sister to his stronghold, and only yesterday I came upon her there, while looking for you, for I believed that she was dead."

"She is the wife of Don Diaz, his captive, too, and she hates him as dearly as she once loved him."

"You will see her to-morrow."

"But my father believed my mother and myself dead, and my sister was reported to have been drowned in the Rio Grande while crossing."

"Untold torture did this man Purdy heap upon my father to get him to confess about the treasure, which he knew nothing of, and which the lawyer had found long before."

"At last my father escaped and became a herder for a ranchero."

"He took to training steers, and soon had them as disciplined as soldiers."

"Then he began his revenge against the Red Revolver Rangers, mounted upon a steer and attacking them whenever he could do so."

"He became known as the Mad Hermit, for no one knew aught about him."

"One day I was ambushed, and my father and his herd came just in time to save my life."

"He was wounded, but I helped him to remount his steer and then took him to his retreat."

"I should tell you, however, that after your father drove me away as a thief I came here to Texas."

"I wished to avenge those I loved, and by the capture of the Red Revolver Rangers to secure enough gold to pay him back what he owed me of taking."

"Until I could do that I wished to hide my face from my fellow men, and so masked myself."

"But to my story, my father lived for some months, until a few weeks ago, and he gave to me his herd and taught me how to manage them, and it was because I could not go far

from him that I did not accompany your train to protect it."

"Now let me tell you that when in Baltimore one night I saw Dyas Purdy and recognized him."

"I followed him, and as I wished to get into his confidence, I played cards with him."

"He had seen me but once, believed me to be dead, so did not know me."

"He cheated at cards and I lost, and seeing an officer who sought him, for crimes in the past, he left, and thus escaped."

"I went to the office again, and I dropped to sleep, for I believe Purdy drugged the wine to stupefy me while playing."

"The next day your father drove me away as a thief, and I came to Texas as I told you."

"But let me tell you that last night, after I saw you in the canyon, I had a dream."

"It was a strange one, for I dreamt that I had, while asleep, taken that money from the safe and hidden it in a secret drawer in the desk the clerks gave your father."

"He had never used the secret drawer, I remember, and if he did not sell the desk the money must be there, and if he did, the secret drawer would not be found."

"When I rescue my sister and see Purdy hanged, I will go and find that desk."

"Then seek it at our home, for a strange notion caused me to bring it with us here."

"Thank God!" said the man, and he added:

"To-morrow I can show my face among my fellow-men."

And Adele dropped back to where her father rode, and telling him to come back to the rear of the line, she told him all, and he said, in a voice quivering with emotion:

"Heaven forgive me the wrong I have done that man."

CHAPTER LIV.

CONCLUSION.

Why dwell upon scenes of carnage, kind reader, more than to say that the stronghold was taken; the Masked Rider, no longer the Unknown, leading Texas Jack's Terrors and the others into the stronghold at dawn, and after a short, sharp action capturing the place.

Many escaped, but the lieutenant was shot early in the fight by Texas Jack, who hastily had him carried off and buried, and Don Diaz was seized by the Terrors, and, with several others, swung up with lariats to the nearest trees.

Leilah, the beautiful and unhappy wife of the Red Revolver Ranger chief, was warmly greeted by Adele and the colonel, and the whole party started for the Texas shore as soon as night fell, and the Terrors were loaded down with plunder.

Leilah went home with Adele, and the first act of the beautiful girl upon her return was to go to the secret drawer in the desk and there she found the money, just as it had been put there over a year before by Leroy Lamar while walking in his sleep.

Some months after Texas Jack visited the ranch, and told Colonel Fontaine that his son had been killed in Mexico, but he did not say that he was the lieutenant of the Red Revolver Rangers when he met his death.

One night, six months after the arrival of the emigrant train, there was a wedding in the Fontaine cabin, and Adele became Mrs. Leroy Lamar, while Bessie Langley was her bridesmaid, for she said she was getting in practice for her own marriage, which followed soon after, when she married one of Texas Jack's Terrors.

As for Leilah, there was a cloud upon her life, for never could she forget that she had been the bride of the chief of the Red Revolver Rangers; but she was always proud of her noble brother, who had won fame as the Wild Steer Rider of Texas.

THE END.

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